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Salesians Sued in Sex Case

4 Men Say They Were Molested at Seminary Nearly 30 Years Ago

By Gary Stern
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Four former students at a junior seminary run by the Salesians claim in a civil lawsuit that they were repeatedly sexually molested by members of the religious order while living at the seminary between 1969 and 1973.

The lawsuit contends several Salesian officials then working at the boarding school for would-be priests in Goshen, Orange County, knew the abuse was taking place. One plaintiff, Joseph Lemme of Monmouth County, N.J., said details of his abuse reached the Rev. Emilio Allue, then seminary director and now an auxiliary bishop in Boston, whose only action was to dismiss Lemme from the seminary because he "was not priest material."

The suit includes as defendants the Roman Catholic order itself and two top officials of the Salesians' New Rochelle-based eastern U.S. province, contending that the Salesian hierarchy failed to protect those in its care. The Salesians' worldwide mission is to serve children in need.

"The plaintiffs are concerned that nobody else be subject to these kinds of assaults," said Marcia Goffin, a Manhattan lawyer representing the plaintiffs. "The Salesians deal with children. We want to ensure that the defendants over whom they still have authority no longer deal with kids. And we want the Salesians to recognize what happened to our clients."

The suit seeks an unspecified amount of damages. It was filed in state Supreme Court in White Plains Sept. 5.

The four plaintiffs, who came to the Salesian Junior Seminary as teenagers from devout Catholic families, stayed in touch but never discussed the abuse they endured, said plaintiff Michael Egan.

"You're always afraid of it," said Egan, now a minister in Middletown, near Goshen, for the Church of Christ, an evangelical Protestant denomination. "You were helpless at one point in your life, a victim, and you don't want to bring that helplessness back. I hid it for many years with alcohol and drugs and didn't sober up until '93."

Egan said that it was the media coverage of the Catholic Church's evolving sex-abuse scandal, particularly a lawsuit against a Salesian priest, that got the former schoolmates talking early this year about abuse and, finally, what had happened to them.

"I'm not in it for the money," Egan said. "We want to help other people, get people to open their eyes, listen to their kids."

A priest at the Salesians' provincial office, which oversees the order's operations east of the Mississippi River, referred questions to the order's lawyers.

Seth Taube of McCarter and English, the firm representing the Salesians, said the statute of limitations has long ago run out, and the case should be dismissed as untimely.

"The Salesians' comment is that although they appreciate that the plaintiffs feel that they are in pain,

the Salesians feel that these allegations took place so many years ago," he said.

Goffin said that while the charges are old - as have been many of the allegations that surfaced this year against priests - the Salesians have a responsibility to answer them.

"We think the world has come to recognize that, in these circumstances, there is something to examine," she said.

The plaintiffs, in addition to Egan and Lemme, are Angelo Zaccagnino of Westchester County and Vincent Oberlander of Monmouth County, N.J. Zaccagnino, according to court papers, was serving as an altar boy at Our Lady of Rosary Church in Port Chester, a church affiliated with the Salesian order, when he was recruited to enroll in the Salesians' junior seminary.

All four plaintiffs, according to court papers, were recruited to the junior seminary by the Rev. Frank Nugent, who is also listed as a defendant. The Salesians reached a settlement in 1998 with a Massachusetts woman who charged that she and her two brothers were sexually abused by Nugent.

Zaccagnino, Egan and Lemme also charge that they were sexually abused by a former Salesian brother, George Puello, often in their beds at the seminary. The lawsuit alleges that a dorm supervisor and two brothers knew that Puello was regularly going to Zaccagnino's bed.

The suit also contends seminary officials knew that Puello often took Lemme off the seminary grounds. Puello took him to hotel rooms, according to the papers. When Lemme told a priest about the abuse, and the priest told Allue, Lemme was dismissed from the seminary, according to the suit.

Oberlander and Egan also were abused by a priest, the Rev. Richard Matikonas, who promoted "studies" on masturbation to take advantage of the students, the lawsuit claims.

Matikonas and Nugent are believed still to be members of the Salesian order, Goffin said. Puello is no longer a member, she said.

In August, leaders of Catholic religious orders agreed at an annual conference that abusive priests should be removed from ministry, but not kicked out or defrocked. It was a less harsh position than that taken in June by diocesan bishops, who voted that abusive priests should be defrocked in some cases.

In April, a Salesian priest, the Rev. William Burke, was removed from ministry at the Marian Shrine in Stony Point after he was accused of molesting a teenage boy in 1987 in Florida. The Rev. James Heuser, vice provincial of the Salesians' eastern region, said then the order had sometimes failed to protect young people.

"We are sorry for the sexual misconduct of some of our members, for the unspeakable violation of the young whom we have harmed rather than served," he said then.

Heuser and the Rev. Patrick Angelucci, provincial or head of the eastern region, are named as defendants in the junior-seminary case.