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Diocese Removes Priests Accused of Sexual Abuse

Latest Actions Related to Ongoing Scandal Announced from Pulpits on Palm Sunday

By Andrew Tilghman
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Two Albany Diocese Priests Accused Of Molesting Children In The 1970s Were Removed From The Ministry Last Week, The Ninth And 10th Local Clergymen To Lose Their Posts In The 15-month-old Sexual Abuse Scandal, Church Officials Said Sunday.

The Two Priests Named Publicly On Palm Sunday Were The Rev. John F. Connolly, 67, A Roving Assistant Pastor And Former Principal At Cardinal McCloskey High School In Albany; And The Rev. Sean McMahon, 69, A Native Of Ireland And Longtime Parish Priest At Sacred Heart Church In Cairo, Greene County, Church Officials Said.

Albany Bishop Howard Hubbard Said Announcements Were Made Sunday From Pulpits In Several Capital Region Parishes Where The Two Men Had Served. The State's Five-year Criminal Statute Of Limitations Has Expired On The Incidents Of Abuse, And The Allegations Will Not Be Referred To Prosecutors, Church Officials Said.

McMahon Admitted To Sexually Abusing A Child In The 1970s, After The Victim Contacted The Diocese In Recent Months. As A Result, Hubbard Permanently Barred Him Serving In Any Public Capacity As A Priest, Including Celebrating Mass.

Two Alleged Victims Have Contacted The Diocese In Recent Months To Accuse Connolly Of Sexually Abusing Them In The 1970s. The Priest Denied The Allegations, But Hubbard Placed Him On Administrative Leave Pending Further Investigation Based On The Recommendation Of The Diocesan Sexual Misconduct Panel, Church Officials Said.

Connolly And Hubbard Were Classmates At Albany's Mater Christi Seminary In The 1960s. Last Year, Hubbard Described The Priest As A "Good Friend" Who Helped Him Through Challenging Science Classes, According To The Diocesan Newspaper, The Evangelist.

Connolly Is The Second Classmate Of Hubbard's To Be Accused Of Sexually Abusing Children. The Rev. John Fitzpatrick, Who Was Also Among Mater Christi's Class Of 1964, Was Accused Of Molesting At Least Five Children And Was Forced To Leave The Ministry In 1996, Church Officials Have Said.

The Removal Of The Two Men Brings To 16 The Number Of Priests Who Worked In The Albany Diocese In The 1970s Who Have Since Been Accused Of Sexual Misconduct With Children. Six Of Them Had Retired Or Left The Priesthood By June 2002, When The U.S. Conference Of Catholic Bishops Adopted A Zero-tolerance Rule For Child Molesters In The Priesthood.

Connolly Was Principal At Cardinal McCloskey High School From 1972 To 1976, Where He Worked Alongside Two Assistant Principals Who Also Have Been Accused Of Sexually Abusing Children The Rev. Joseph Romano In 1974 And The Rev. David Bentley In 1976. Connolly Also Was Principal Of St. Peter's Academy In Saratoga Springs From 1969 To 1972, Church Officials Said.

Most Recently, Connolly Helped Out On Weekends At Various Parishes. Until This Week, He Also Was Serving As Chaplain For The Diocesan Cemeteries And Interim Chairman Of The Priests'

Retirement Board, Church Officials Said.

Connolly, Ordained In 1964, Also Was Pastor At St. Anne's In Waterford From 1976 To 1982, At Our Lady Of Victory In Troy From 1983 To 1995, And Our Lady Of Fatima In Delanson From 1995 To 2000, Church Officials Said.

Neither Connolly Nor McMahon Could Be Reached For Comment Late Sunday.

On Sunday Morning At Our Lady Of Victory Church In Troy, The Rev. Randall Patterson Announced Connolly's Removal Near The End Of The 11:30 A.M. Mass.

The Hundreds Of Palm Sunday Worshippers Who Filled The Church Seemed Stunned. Most Were Silent Or Said Little Upon Hearing The News.

Patterson Told Parishioners That He Was Very Upset By The Development But Thought It Best That Congregants Learn About It Through Their Church Rather Than Through The Media. He Then Proceeded To Finish The Mass.

The Removals Come As The Diocese Is Starting Up Its Annual Fund-raising Campaign, The Bishop's Appeal. Last Year, The Diocese Said The Sexual Abuse Scandal Had Not Affected Contributions. This Year, Church Officials Have Declined To Discuss The Final Results Of The 2002 Campaign, Which Ended In March.

John Aretakis, An Attorney Who Represents Victims Of Sexual Abuse, Said On Sunday That He Has A Client With Allegations Involving Connolly, But Aretakis Said He Has Not Yet Notified The Diocese About The Claim. The Attorney Said He Does Not Have Any Clients With Allegations Involving McMahon.

McMahon And Six Other Priests Who Are Known To Have Sexually Abused At Least One Child Will Have To Decide Whether To Leave The Priesthood Entirely Or Confine Themselves To A Monastic Setting For A Life Of "Prayer And Penance," According To National Policies Adopted By U.S. Bishops Last Year.

McMahon, Ordained In 1962, Is A Native Of Kerry County, Ireland. Before Beginning His Nearly Three Decades At His Cairo Parish, He Had Served As Assistant Parishes In Troy, Schenectady, Johnstown And Whitehall, Church Officials Said.

The Diocese's Nine-member Misconduct Panel Is Composed Of Both Priests And Lay Members Of The Church. They Meet About Once A Month To Evaluate Allegations And Consider Whether Hubbard Should Remove A Priest Or Offer Money And Other Services To Victims.

The Diocese Has Not Said How Many Victims Have Come Forward With Allegations Of Sexual Abuse During The Past Year. Interviews With Victims And Their Attorneys Suggest The Church Has Dozens Of Outstanding Claims To Evaluate.

Hubbard Said Last Year The Diocese Has Paid Victims Of Sexual Abuse By Priests More Than \$2.3 Million Since He Became Bishop.