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Church Abuse Takes Years to Heal Incidents Often Not Reported for Decades

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HERKIMER -- Victims of sex abuse by priests and the churches and memberships those priests are in contact with share something in common: the need for a healing process.

That healing may be needed again in the Mohawk Valley after the Rev. Robert Shinos, in his late 60s, of the Church of Saint Anthony and Joseph of Herkimer was removed from the ministry. The action followed accusations of abusing a minor 30 years ago in Albany, an allegation diocese officials said was verified.

Herb Freeman, executive director of Family Services of the Mohawk Valley, said victims of sex abuse can deal with conflicting feelings of betrayal and loyalty by coming together in a supportive way.

"Victims spend so much energy trying to keep their secret that they often don't have the strength to explore their own dreams," Freeman said.

A common reason for the long time between abuse and its reporting is the fear of letting family members down, Freeman said. Some feel they must wait until a beloved family member has died to reveal their trauma, as they are too afraid to expose those members to their painful memories.

Mark Furnish of Albany said he was sexually abused by a priest in the Rochester area in the early 1980s while attending a Catholic school there.

In 2002, amid the public outpouring of allegations, Furnish said he couldn't stay quiet any longer.

Furnish, chapter leader for the Capital District's Survivor Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), has traveled around the world as an advocate urging elected officials to bring justice to sexual abuse victims.

In 1990, SNAP was formed for victims of clergy abuse. The national organization offers support to victims and urges political advocacy for proper treatment of religious offenders, Furnish said.

Support group meetings take place twice a month at locations throughout the country.

In addition to the alleged victim, members of the parish community of Saints Anthony and Joseph's must begin their own healing journey of forgiveness and understanding as they try to sort out the accusations against a trusted official.

Because everyone will react differently, there is not just one answer or solution for the community, said Ken Goldfarb, director of communication for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany. A continued effort toward understanding and an increase in services will be available through the local parish as well as the diocese, he said.

Parish members were notified at Mass March 7 about the accusations against Shinos, Goldfarb said, adding that no more statements will be made in the case.

The Rev. Anthony Ligato has been assigned to cover the Herkimer church as well as at Holy Family Parish in Little Falls. The Rev. Charles Celeste is on leave pending an ongoing investigation of accusations of sexual misconduct during the mid-1980s with a college student. Ligato will begin serving the area Sunday, March 21.

If people have questions, Goldfarb encourages them to speak with Ligato when he arrives or to call the diocese.

Albany lawyer John Aretakis has represented numerous cases within the Albany Diocese and is currently representing a victim alleging abuse against Shinos. Victims need to feel safe, Aretakis said, and know that it is OK to go public with their stories.

Many people were abused at 10 or 12 years old are now stepping forward as adults, he said. Many are experiencing broken or failed relationships, depression, addiction and other issues from being silent for so long, he said.

By bringing their cases to justice through either settlements or removal of priests, it may save others from experiencing the same abuse, he said.

"Bottom line, it is all about protecting children from future abuse," Aretakis said.

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