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Priest Banished from New York LED Mass in Boca

By Sonja Isger
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Catholic church officials in New York say this is the case they did right: a Brooklyn priest confessed to molesting a child so they made him leave the parish and told him never to work as a priest again.

But five years later, the man was leading Mass and hearing confession at a church in Boca Raton.

And the priest in that Palm Beach County parish had no idea that the man helping him out on a part-time basis had been accused of molesting a boy 20 years earlier. "If I would've known that, I wouldn't have let him work," Monsignor John McMahon said Monday.

The Rev. Anthony Failla conducted about a dozen masses, including funerals, in about six weeks starting in December 2000 before St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church pulled the plug, McMahon said.

McMahon stopped him not because he was an accused molester but because he failed to complete the necessary paperwork, which included getting permission from his former bishop to work as a priest again, McMahon said.

The story of Failla's alleged sexual misconduct was first publicly revealed by nuns in Brooklyn and reported in The New York Times last week. The nuns alerted Brooklyn church officials, led by Bishop Thomas V. Daily, to the allegations in 1996 and said they stepped forward now because they resent the diocese's secrecy and feel the church's response has been inadequate.

But only Monday did officials in the Palm Beach Diocese confirm that Failla (pronounced FAY-ella) had briefly been allowed to work in this county, despite a letter from Brooklyn church officials notifying them of Failla's presence here. Neither diocese has revealed the contents of the letter or whether it spelled out that he was not to work as a priest.

All of this comes as the Catholic church and Daily - the founding bishop of the Palm Beach Diocese - are under fire for not adequately investigating misconduct complaints against priests and merely shuffling those accused from parish to parish.

And admissions of earlier sexual misconduct have tarnished the last two bishops to serve the Palm Beach Diocese. In 1998, Bishop J. Keith Symons resigned after admitting to sexually molesting boys earlier in his career. His replacement, Bishop Anthony J. O'Connell, also resigned after he admitted this month to improperly touching a teenage student in a Missouri seminary school and said another alleged victim might come forward.

Failla could not be reached for comment Friday or Monday, but he told The New York Times that Brooklyn Monsignor Otto Garcia's assertion that he confessed is wrong.

Garcia "misunderstood," Failla said. "I never fondled anybody, never touched anyone."

A following in Bensonhurst

The allegations date to the mid-1970s, when the nuns were assigned to St. Michael-St. Edward's Church. The nuns first heard hints of impropriety in 1993 from a parishioner, the mother of two boys.

Then they heard from a man who had been orphaned at age 12 by the death of his mother and sent to live with the priests, including Failla, at the rectory. He said Failla molested him on about 10 occasions over a year.

By the time the nuns approached church officials in 1996, Failla moved from Brooklyn to Bensonhurst's St. Finbar's Catholic parish and had been there 19 years.

In those nearly two decades, Failla won over Bensonhurst's parishioners by helping rebuild the church. He helped restore a building plagued with a leaky roof, peeling paint and outdated electrical wiring. He also established a home for the homeless and support groups for everyone from alcoholics to gamblers.

At first Failla's parishioners feared that he was being forced out for no good reason. About 1,200 people, including local politicians and St. Finbar's school students wrote Daily in protest. Later, diocesan spokesman Frank DeRosa told parishioners that Failla asked that he not be assigned to the parish for health reasons.

However, DeRosa and other church officials have since revealed that they were acting on Failla's confession to Garcia. They said they forced Failla to give up his job in Bensonhurst and they told him not to work as a priest again.

They did not contact local police, the nuns or the victims.

Symons received letter

Failla headed for Boca Raton. A letter from Daily to Symons notified this diocese of Failla's arrival in Palm Beach County.

DeRosa said Wednesday that he did not know whether the letter detailed the allegations against Failla.

"The letter was received and Bishop Symons receipted the letter," Palm Beach Diocese spokesman Sam Barbaro said Monday. The diocese was unable to provide a copy of the letter or say when it was dated.

But Symons resigned in 1998, and by December 2000, Failla had begun to fill in at St. Joan's.

St. Joan's parish serves 6,500 families and is the largest in the diocese. To cover all the services requested, McMahon said several part-time priests help out. Some come to Florida for the winter, others teach in the area or are retired here, he said.

When a priest wants to help out on a part-time basis, he usually comes with credentials that include a letter from his last bishop permitting him to provide those services, said Barbaro. Usually, a priest would submit those credentials directly to the diocese office.

When priests don't come with credentials in hand, they must fill out paperwork to get a "Certificate of Aptitude," Barbaro said. The application asks about six or seven questions, including whether the priest has abused alcohol or has any record of criminal behavior.

"They must answer those questions and must have a letter of recommendation and certification from their last bishop," Barbaro said.

McMahon recalled that Failla did not have credentials in hand and that he filled out an initial one-page application when he offered his services. Failla told him he was in Florida and retired because a bad back prohibited him from working full time, McMahon said.

'It's pretty black and white'

McMahon said he can't recall the exact timing of the paperwork. But in a short time, Failla needed to get the more detailed credentials including his former bishop's permission to work, and he simply didn't.

"When additional information was requested, he chose not to fill that out. Then we said, 'Well, you can't work at St. Joan's,' " McMahon said.

He added that Failla conducted Mass and was not in a position to be alone with children or teens. But considering the priest's past, even that was too much, he said.

"You can't have him sitting up here and setting up any rapport. He wouldn't have ministered here. It's pretty black and white," McMahon said.

The two never discussed why Failla didn't follow through with the paperwork, he said.

Hindsight being what it is, Barbaro said church officials are now even more aware and would be more meticulous in waiting for a priest's full credentials and paperwork before letting him step in front of a congregation.

"This is the safeguard that the diocese has," Barbaro said. As for the slip that let Failla lead masses: "Luckily it was only a month or so."

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