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New Bishop Inducted As Diocese Faces Yet More Claims of Abuse

By Keach Hagey
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At least in the short term, it doesn't look like things are going to be much easier for the newly installed bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens than they were for his predecessor.

Just two days before Bishop Nicholas Dimarzio was installed at the helm of the diocese, 27 Catholics who grew up in Brooklyn and Queens filed a sex abuse lawsuit against parish priests, also accusing retiring Bishop Thomas Daily of helping to sweep the scandals under the rug.

The allegations are contained in a \$300-million lawsuit filed Wednesday, October 1st, by attorney Michael Dowd in State Supreme Court in Queens.

The suit claims that 24 priests, including three who still work in the diocese, raped, sodomized and molested the plaintiffs as children in the '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s.

The abuse has manifested itself in their adult lives as depression, sexual confusion, loss of faith in the church, and, in some cases, alcohol and drug abuse, the alleged victims say. Five of the plaintiffs are women and 22 are men.

All of the accused priests have either been suspended from the diocese based on sexual abuse allegations, left the priesthood, moved away or died, except for three, who work in Queens.

Perhaps the most shocking allegations were levelled against Father Vincent Gallo, currently the pastor at St. Pancras in Glendale. The lawsuit alleges that Gallo sexually abused a young boy while assigned to Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish in Bushwick in the late 1960s.

The plaintiff, then 14, alleges that Gallo asked him to bring in sexually explicit pictures to confession, where he then watched as the boy masturbated.

Gallo had yet to be served with papers when he was reached by the Queens Chronicle on Monday. "I haven't seen anything. All I know is that an allegation has been made. It's not true and I deny it," he said.

One of Gallo's assistants, the Reverend Brian Keller, was suspended last year following a similar claim. Keller's name was turned over to Queens District Attorney Richard Brown last year by the diocese, which had received complaints about him from former parishioners. He was not among the defendants of last week's suit.

Also named as defendants were the Reverend Hugo Bedoya and Monsignor Francis Mulhall, two priests assigned to administrative positions on the diocese marriage tribunal, which decides annulment cases.

The suit claims that Bedoya sexually abused an altar boy between the ages of 9 and 11 while stationed at Fourteen Holy Martyrs in Bushwick. The abuse allegedly occurred in the rectory, in the "ready" room before mass and on a church-sponsored trip. The suit alleges that, in addition to other odd sexual behavior, Bedoya examined the genitals of his altar boys to make sure they were clean.

Bedoya, contacted at the Immaculate Conception Center in Douglaston, referred calls to diocesan leadership.

The suit claims that Mulhall, who works as an archivist at the marriage tribunal in Douglaston, fondled a girl when she was seven or eight years old in the rectory at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Park Slope and in the confessional.

Frank DeRosa, spokesman for the diocese, said diocese leadership had not yet seen the lawsuit and could not comment on the allegations.

In addition to charges against individual priests, the suit claims that Daily engaged in a cover-up of the problem, moving priests from parish to parish " ...to deprive plaintiffs of the facts necessary to establish claims ... for misconduct, until the applicable statutes of limitations had expired."

Generally, victims of childhood abuse in New York have until three years after they turn 18 to file lawsuits. Dowd is asking that the courts ignore that time limit because, he alleges, the diocese engaged in a scheme to cover up the abuse.

State Supreme Court Judge Janice Taylor ruled against that argument earlier this year, dismissing a similar suit that Dowd filed last October, naming 42 plaintiffs and 13 priests as defendants. That decision is being appealed. In the meantime, Dowd said he believes this suit will meet a different fate because it contains the additional claim of fraud.

Eight of the clergymen named in the first suit are also named in the recent suit, but by different alleged victims.

The Ridgewood man scheduled to be the lead plaintiff in the case, Dennis Brown, 44, died a week before the case was filed, apparently from drinking antifreeze.

Brown, who grew up in Flushing attending St. Michael's School and Church, claimed that while serving as an altar boy in 1970 and 1971, he was repeatedly molested by Reverend James Collins, 57. Dowd said Brown's name would be added to the suit as soon as an executor is named for his estate.

He is accused of fondling an altar boy in a church rectory in 1981, when he was a priest at Our Lady Queen of Martyrs in Forest Hills. The allegations in this suit are similar to claims against him last year, all by males. The diocese suspended Collins last year from his most recent assignment, chaplain at Bishop Kearney High School, an all-girls school in Bensonhurst.

The lawsuit also includes two claims against Father James Smith, who was suspended last year as pastor of St. Kevin's Church in Flushing following more than two dozen complaints from people who said that Smith abused them as children. Last week's suit alleges that he molested a girl at Our Lady of Grace Church in Howard Beach in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and also molested a boy at Holy Trinity Parish Church in Whitestone during the late 1960s and early 1970s. He has denied any improprieties.

Father Thomas O'Rourke was accused in the suit of abusing an altar boy whose family he befriended while assigned to Corpus Christi Parish in Woodside, but the abuse did not occur until O'Rourke was reassigned to American Martyrs in Bayside. The abuse allegedly occurred on a trip the plaintiff took with O'Rourke in about 1974. O'Rourke, who was also accused of abusing another boy at Corpus Christi in another suit, died in 1998.

The suit further alleges that Father Edward Maurer sexually abused two boys, one at Our Lady Queen of Martyrs in Forest Hills during the 1970s and the other at St. Thomas Aquinas in Brooklyn during the 1980s. Maurer, whose whereabouts are unknown, was also a defendant in last year's suit.

Another defendant, Father James Frost, allegedly abused a plaintiff over a period of 10 years, beginning when the alleged victim was 10 years old and continuing through three reassignments,

including St. Sebastians in Woodside.

The suit accuses Father Richard Lewkiewicz of accosting and raping a seven-year-old boy as he was leaving Blessed Sacrament Church in Jackson Heights in 1970. The boy had been practicing for his First Holy Communion when, the suit claims, Lewkiewicz stopped him, took him to the confessional and raped him. The defendant is no longer working as a priest.

Father Herbert McElroy is accused of abusing an 11- or 12-year-old boy during the 1950s at St. Mary Magdalene Parish in Springfield Gardens. McElroy served as the coach of the basketball team, and some of the abuse occurred on sports trips, the suit alleges. The defendant's whereabouts are unknown.

The suit alleges that Father James Russo, who was in charge of altar boys at St. Virgilius Parish in Broad Channel during the late 1970s, sexually abused a boy who was about 12 years old, taking him to his room in the rectory and forcing him to remove his clothes, where he fondled him. Russo is believed to have been assigned to a parish in Florida, but the suit says his whereabouts are unknown.

Father James Sicker allegedly abused an altar boy at St. Pancras Church in Glendale in the late 1950s and early 1960s. According to the lawsuit, Sicker asked the boy, then between the ages of 12 and 14, to join a "secret club" in the restroom of the parish elementary school. The handshake for the "secret club" involved manipulating each others' genitals, the suit alleges.

Father Protasio Soares was charged in the suit by a female plaintiff, who alleges that he repeatedly sexually abused her, beginning when she was nine in the 1950s, while he was assigned to St. Bartholomew Parish in Elmhurst.

Father Patrick Sexton was accused in the suit of molesting Salvatore Carlino, currently of Deer Park, in the rectory of St. Cecilia's Church in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Sexton was also accused of sexual abuse during a six-month period in the same church by Bayside resident Daniel Dugo in March of 2000. Dugo, who was eight at the time of the alleged abuse, lost the case and rejected the church's \$15,000 settlement.