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Alleged Sex Victim Dies

Was Lead Plaintiff in Planned Suit Accusing Priest of Abuse

By Stephanie Saul
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The lead plaintiff in a lawsuit alleging sexual abuse by 24 priests in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn has died after ingesting antifreeze - just days before the suit is to be filed.

Dennis M. Brown, 44, died Sunday night at Wyckoff Heights Medical Center in Bushwick.

Police said he was taken there Saturday after his girlfriend called 911, saying Brown was unsteady on his feet and having difficulty breathing. It was not known if Brown ingested the antifreeze by accident or on purpose, a police source said.

Brown's legal allegations of sexual abuse by the Rev. James Collins are to be made public next week, Brown's lawyer, Michael Dowd, said yesterday.

"He wasn't looking for money," said Brown's mother, Dorothy Fergus of Venice, Fla. "He was looking for Collins to be out of the church."

Brown is one of at least six former parishioners who have complained that Collins sexually abused them. The abuse is alleged to have occurred when Collins was assigned to three parishes in Queens: St. Michael's in Flushing, Our Lady Queen of Martyrs in Forest Hills and St. Margaret's in Middle Village.

Last year, Bishop Thomas Daily suspended Collins from his most recent job as chaplain at Bishop Kearney High School in Brooklyn, an all-girls school. He remains suspended from his duties and could not be located for comment.

Fergus said her son wrote the Diocese of Brooklyn in 1995 to complain that Collins fondled him in 1970, when he was an altar boy at St. Michael's.

Fergus said her son got a response from Msgr. Otto Garcia, a chancery official and legal adviser to Daily. In that letter, Garcia said he had confronted Collins with the allegations, but Collins denied the incident occurred. He also invited Brown to hold a meeting with Collins.

"Dennis got so angry," Fergus said. "He wanted Father Garcia punished just as much as Father Collins. He didn't like the idea of a priest protecting a priest."

A spokesman for the Diocese of Brooklyn, Frank DeRosa, said yesterday that the invitation from Garcia would have been extended "as part of the investigative process." DeRosa also extended condolences to Brown's family. "We are deeply saddened by this tragic loss of life," he said.

Fergus said that she had trusted Collins with her two sons when the family lived in Flushing and that they were both altar boys at St. Michael's.

"I trusted this man," Fergus said yesterday. "He used to drive the kids to the beach. He drove them to camp at Port Jervis."

Dennis Brown graduated from Mater Christi Diocesan High School in Astoria, now known as St. John's Preparatory. He later attended junior college in Florida and moved to Atlanta, where he worked for 20 years in property management.

Family members said he battled alcoholism for much of his life.

"Dennis struggled with keeping himself above," said brother Kevin Brown, who lives in Cary, N.C. "His self-esteem was low, but he was liked by people."

Recently, there had been signs Dennis Brown was getting his life together. He had been sober for three years, his brother said, and recently accepted a new job in New York.

He was living with a friend in Ridgewood, where he collapsed early Saturday morning, hours after he had quarreled with his girlfriend.

"I don't know if he meant to kill himself," Kevin Brown said. "He didn't tell anybody. He didn't leave a note."

Kevin Brown, a former Fordham University basketball player, said he is angry with the Catholic Church.

"It just infuriates me," he said. "I would not buy a product from a corporation that acted the way the Catholic Church has acted."

Dennis Brown is listed as the lead plaintiff in a suit Dowd said he will file in State Supreme Court in Queens next week. Dowd said the suit will name 27 plaintiffs and 24 priests, including priests who have not been identified before as alleged sexual abusers.

The suit could face obstacles. A judge dismissed a similar case last year against 12 current and former priests and a religious brother. Ruling that the abuse occurred too long ago, Justice Janice A. Taylor of Queens threw out that case, filed on behalf of 42 adults who said they had been sexually abused as children by the clergymen. Dowd plans to appeal that decision.

Funeral Mass will be said for Brown at 10 a.m. today at Our Lady Queen of Martyrs in Forest Hills, one of the parishes where Collins was assigned.

"They'll bury him from the church where Collins molested kids," Dowd said.

Staff writer Wil Cruz contributed to this story.

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