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Priest Named in Abuse Files Worked in Prosecutor's Office

By Dean E. Murphy
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The pastor of a Roman Catholic parish in Flushing, Queens, who has been placed on administrative leave because of allegations of past child sexual abuse, held a part-time job until last month in the domestic violence unit of the Queens district attorney's office, law enforcement and diocesan officials said yesterday.

The most recent of a series of jobs in the office involved clerk-level work, and for more than seven years in the 1990's, the priest, the Rev. James T. Smith, worked as a counselor for victims of domestic battering, and before that he counseled elderly beating victims, according to a review of his employment record by the district attorney's office. Father Smith first worked in the office in the mid-1980's, the records show.

Father Smith was fired on March 22, when the Diocese of Brooklyn notified the district attorney's office that he had been accused of child sexual abuse, a law enforcement official said. He was relieved of his pastoral duties at the Flushing parish, St. Kevin Church, around the same time.

A spokesman for Richard A. Brown, the Queens district attorney, said that Father Smith's employment was periodic and irregular and that he was paid on a per diem basis. He had not worked since February, and during the last five years he worked fewer than 10 days a year; the most he worked in a single year was 100 days in 1992, said the spokesman, Patrick Clark.

Mr. Clark said that there had been no complaints in the district attorney's office about Father Smith's work and that it appeared that none of the priest's jobs involved counseling children. "I was told that he was likable and personable and he was capable in performing his duties," Mr. Clark said.

In a letter read last weekend to parishioners at St. Kevin Church, Bishop Thomas V. Daily said the priest had denied the abuse allegations, which were made recently and involved "inappropriate sexual contact" with three minors more than 20 years ago. The bishop said that Father Smith had been ordered to enter a psychological treatment center because the stress of the allegations had put him in a state of depression.

"This does not negate all of the good and dedicated priestly service that Father Smith has offered in our diocese," the bishop said in his letter. "However, in view of this difficult and painful situation, and since he has reached the retirement age of 71, I do not intend to extend Father Smith's term as pastor of St. Kevin."

A spokesman for the diocese, Frank De Rosa, said Father Smith's employment with the district attorney's office was undertaken on his own and had nothing to do with the diocese. "It was his interest," Mr. De Rosa said. "A lot of priests who work in the community get involved in certain organizations according to their interests and skills."

Mr. Clark said it was highly unusual for a member of the clergy to work in the office. "I believe this is the only priest who is affiliated with the district attorney's office," he said.

According to the office's records, Father Smith began volunteering there in the mid-1980's to assist elderly abuse victims. A few years later, John J. Santucci, who was the district attorney at the time,

appointed Father Smith to a committee of clergy members and community representatives that screened applicants for the second-chance program, which allows some first-time nonviolent offenders to clear their records by community service and other supervised activities.

Father Smith got his first paying job in the office in 1990, when he was hired as a part-time counselor in the criminal court bureau, where he interviewed victims of domestic violence and helped prepare their court papers. In 1997, when the counseling functions were transferred out of the district attorney's office, Father Smith was classified as a clerk-typist.

A law enforcement official said Father Smith was apparently kept on the payroll to help him collect some pension benefits from the county.

Rabbi Bruce Goldwasser of Temple Beth Sholom of Flushing, who had been a volunteer with the second-chance program before Father Smith was, said he came to know Father Smith through an annual ecumenical service in Flushing. He said he was saddened to hear that the priest had become ensnared in the sex-abuse scandal.

"It just breaks my heart -- the thought that it is true or that he is going through the mill if it is not true," Rabbi Goldwasser said.

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