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St. Leo's Church Learns of Ex-pastor's Abuse of Minor

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Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi is greeted by the Rev. Michael Salerno, pastor of St. Leo's Roman Catholic Church in Little Italy, during a ceremony naming a street in Little Italy after her in January 2007. — Examiner file photo Parishioners at St. Leo's Catholic Church in Little Italy were shocked and saddened to learn at weekend Masses that an investigation confirmed their former pastor molested a 13-year-old boy in the late 1970s at a New York church.

Michael Salerno, known as "Father Mike," was removed in November 2007 when allegations surfaced more than 30 years after the abuse occurred, leaving parishioners with little explanation until this weekend when they said they were given a letter dated Dec. 28 from the head of the Pallottine Fathers, the order that runs the church.

"I regret that the investigation took so long to complete, since I know it has been a painful process for many, especially those in the St. Leo's community," the Rev. Peter Sticco wrote.

"The final report of the investigation conducted by the Diocese of Brooklyn confirms that Michael Salerno did sexually abuse a boy. ... He will never again function as a Catholic priest in the Archdiocese of Baltimore or any other diocese."

Parishioners were given copies of the letter as they filed out of the church, reading in stunned silence

that Salerno, 62, admitted to abusing an unidentified minor while he was a Pallottine brother at All Saints Church in Brooklyn. It was still unclear Tuesday whether Salerno faces criminal charges.

"It was a shock to us, and we were all saddened by the news," said Francis Blattermann, of Baltimore, an active parishioner whose wife is the church's religious education director.

"The man was a friend of ours and still is. That will never change. However, we've been praying for all the victims of abuse."

Blattermann said the church now awaits a new pastor to fill the vacancy filled by an associate priest since Salerno's removal more than a year ago.

Parishioners haven't held a "public discussion" regarding the confirmed abuse, Blattermann said, because church leaders didn't address the incident during weekend Masses, other than informing parishioners of the letter being circulated after services.

"I was astonished and disgusted," said Guy Matricciani, a St. Leo's trustee and longtime parishioner. "But we've been here for over 100 years, and we'll keep on going."

Parish Council President John Guerriero has credited Salerno with revitalizing the church and its community after his arrival in 1997 and increasing the congregation by hundreds.

Guerriero was out of the state Tuesday and unavailable for comment.

Salerno joined the Pallottines as a brother in 1968. He was ordained a priest in 1993. No other allegations have surfaced against him, according to Sticco's letter.

Only the Vatican can determine whether Salerno should be defrocked.

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