

BishopAccountability.org

Priest Resigns over 1986 Sex Incident

By Jay Tokasz
Buffalo News
February 27, 2003

A Franciscan priest accused in 1986 of fondling a student at Bishop Timon High School in South Buffalo resigned last week as pastor of a parish in New Jersey, following renewed complaints from the family of the former Timon student.

The Rev. Bernard Splawski was accused of improperly touching an 18-year-old male student at Timon, where he taught from 1969 to 1986 and served for a time as associate principal.

No other complaints of sexual abuse had been lodged against Splawski, who was considered rehabilitated after six months of treatment in a therapeutic center in St. Louis, as well as two years of outpatient after-care and supervision, said the Rev. Charles Miller, vicar provincial of the Franciscan Friars of the Holy Name Province, the order of priests to which Splawski was ordained in 1963.

But Miller said that "because of the present climate, once the question of (a priest's) aptness for ministry is raised publicly, we have an obligation to explore this, and he has to be removed."

For more than a year, the Catholic Church has been reeling from a sexual abuse scandal in which several bishops and dioceses are accused of shuffling abusive priests from parish to parish.

Across the country, the scandal has spurred a series of lawsuits, a grand jury inquiry and civil legislation aimed at preventing future abuse. Lay Catholics in some dioceses have shown their disgust by withholding donations to the church.

In November, the U.S. bishops adopted a new policy on handling sexual abuse allegations. It calls for the removal from ministry of any priest or deacon who has admitted "even a single act of sexual abuse."

The policy does not specifically apply to order priests such as the Franciscans, who report to their own communities rather than a local bishop.

But Miller said his province accepted the bishops' new policy and was implementing it. "Public opinion at this point is a factor that we have to take into account here," said Miller. The present climate "makes it very hard for (Splawski) to minister effectively. Unfortunately, we have to bow to that reality."

Splawski, 68, will remain a Franciscan and live in a friary doing "internal work," said Miller.

He will not be allowed to celebrate Mass in public.

With a recommendation from professionals at the treatment center in St. Louis that he could return to ministry, Splawski took a job as an assistant pastor of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in West Milford, N.J.

The parish is in the Diocese of Paterson, where the Franciscans operate a Catholic high school and are active in several other parishes.

Splawski was appointed pastor of St. Joseph's in 1999.

The Buffalo family contacted the Archdiocese of Newark in December, questioning whether it was appropriate for Splawski to continue as a pastor. The archdiocese then passed the complaint on to the dioceses of Buffalo and Paterson.

Kevin Keenan, Buffalo diocesan spokesman, said: "The diocese first learned of the accusation last month. When he learned of the accusation, Bishop (Henry) Mansell reached out to the family of the young man who accused Father Splawski. In accordance with diocesan policy, the bishop offered counseling to him and his family."

Keenan said he did not know if the man or his family had accepted the offer of counseling. Miller said he was not aware of any financial settlement with the family, which he declined to name.

The Franciscans did not inform the Paterson diocese in 1986 about Splawski's past.

"That was not the ordinary procedure of that time. It should have been, perhaps, but it was not," said Miller.

The Franciscan Friars of Holy Name Province at one time had as many as 40 priests teaching at Bishop Timon High School, now known as Bishop Timon-St. Jude High School, on McKinley Avenue in South Buffalo.

That presence has dwindled to one full-time priest and a priest who spends half his time teaching at Timon and half as pastor of a parish.

Splawski grew up in Olean and attended St. Bonaventure. At Timon, he worked as a science teacher and as associate principal. He also served as guardian of the friars there between 1981 and 1986.

Only a handful of teachers currently at Timon-St. Jude were around when Splawski left the school, said Principal Thomas Sullivan. They recalled Splawski's exit in spring 1986 as swift and quiet, he said.