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Diocese Is Cautious in Addressing Dismissals

A Year after a National Edict Pledged Openness in Cases of Abuse, the Diocese of Buffalo Is Circumspect in How Much It Is Revealing

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When the nation's Catholic bishops gathered last summer in Dallas to confront the church's sexual abuse crisis, they overwhelmingly agreed on a pledge to be more forthright with their parishioners about how they handle abuse allegations.

"In the past," the bishops acknowledged in a document, "secrecy has created an atmosphere that has inhibited the healing process and, in some cases, enabled sexually abusive behavior to be repeated."

The document - "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" - called for bishops to develop a communications policy in their dioceses "that reflects a commitment to transparency and openness" when they address ministerial misconduct involving minors.

But transparency and openness have meant different things to different bishops.

Some bishops - such as the head of the Catholic diocese in Albany - have publicly identified any priests they removed or suspended because of credible allegations of abuse.

Others, including Bishop Henry J. Mansell of Buffalo, are keeping secret the names of removed priests.

Last week, after being pressed for three days about the recent and unannounced removals of two priests, Mansell would only confirm that he had removed "various priests" because of allegations from more than a decade ago.

Through a diocesan spokesman, the bishop said the diocese was under no obligation to name names. He would not elaborate and declined several requests for an interview.

Mansell's approach has prompted a mixed response from priests and parishioners.

"We've been asking for openness and honesty for so long. What a strange way to do it," said Sally Orgren, a parishioner of the University at Buffalo Newman Center and a member of the local chapter of Call to Action, a national Catholic activist organization. "People are going to start speculating, 'Well, who could it be?' It isn't fair to priests who might be resigning for other reasons. And it isn't fair to the people."

Some local priests are upset that Mansell had not taken action to remove the priests last year, following the adoption of the national policy, which was initially approved in June 2002, then revised in November.

Other local priests unwilling to be quoted by name said the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops let them down by adopting a rigid policy that shows no confidence in them.

Several dioceses in 2002 removed priests against whom abuse allegations had been lodged years ago.

"(Mansell) should have done it when everyone else did it. (The controversy) would have dissipated by now. He has stirred things up," said a diocesan priest who asked that his name be withheld.

The priest also said the bishop should have named names for the sake of clergy who are still working.

"It's difficult for priests out in the parishes, because everyone looks at them and says, 'Could he be one, too?' " he said.

Another Catholic clergyman said the diocese's credibility was on the line.

"It should have been taken care of a long time ago. It hurts credibility that (diocesan officials) are not releasing the names. The bishops in Albany and Rochester released the names," said the cleric, who also requested anonymity.

"I can empathize with these guys over the heartache it causes, because they went through treatment and thought this was behind them years ago. But by not releasing their names, you're causing suspicion to fall on every priest who is retired or taking a leave of absence or resigning," the clergyman said. "I feel sorry for the next (priest) who takes an early retirement or resigns, because everyone will say it is sex abuse."

But some parishioners said they saw no reason to release the priests' names.

"These things all happened years ago. There are too many ifs, ands and buts," said Michael DiRienzo, a Lovejoy resident who attended the bishop's morning Mass on Friday in St. Joseph Cathedral.

Vincent J. Sorrentino, an attorney and former Erie County Democratic chairman, who was also at the Mass, said he was comfortable with Mansell's latest actions.

"Basically, he's addressing wrongs that are decades old," Sorrentino said.

Accusations revealed

More than a year ago, diocesan officials revealed that as many as 15 priests in the diocese had been accused of sexual abuse over the past two decades.

The names of six of those priests were revealed in April 2002 - four of them through legal proceedings and two through confirmation by the diocese. But, despite repeated requests from The News over the past year, the diocese has declined to discuss the remaining cases - including whether the accused priests are still in ministry.

Diocesan spokesman Kevin A. Keenan on Friday said diocesan officials were estimating when they said 15 priests had been accused of sexual abuse.

"At the time, that was an estimate, and as far as we know, there's no priest in active ministry in the Diocese of Buffalo now who has committed an act of sexual abuse involving a minor at any time," Keenan said.

Although the diocese says the abuses by priests occurred a decade or more ago, at least one complaint has occurred recently.

A Western New York man said he sent a statement to the diocese just a few months ago, explaining that a diocesan priest abused him in the late 1960s. The man said he was concerned that the same priest might have abused others.

Diocesan officials told him they would look into his complaint and "treat it fairly," he said.

The next time he spoke with the diocese, an official told him the accused priest had retired.

"I was told that it was directly related to the complaint," said the man, who did not want his name used.

Revealing names

So far, revealing the names of accused priests who were removed from ministry appears to be a judgment call by individual bishops.

According to Sister Mary Ann Walsh, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "transparency and openness" should translate into "giving out information unless there's a serious reason not to. That's the understanding."

Those reasons would include state laws or court orders prohibiting the release of the information or victims' asking that the information not be released, she said.

Kathleen McChesney, director of the conference's National Office for Child and Youth Protection, said bishops had varied approaches to naming accused priests.

"The charter wasn't real specific about it," she said. "Transparency means providing all the information about the problem and what's being done about it without violating people's rights to privacy."

McChesney added that there isn't a "one size fits all" approach to the identification question.

In Albany, Bishop Howard Hubbard has stated that it is the diocese's policy to identify priests who have been removed or suspended.

In Rochester, Bishop Matthew H. Clark identified six priests he removed last spring because of sexual abuse allegations.

Both bishops made public announcements in the parishes about the reasons for the dismissals.

Described as retirements

Instead, most of the removed priests described their departures as retirements. Only one accused priest publicly acknowledged - in a church bulletin - that he was being removed because of an incident 16 years ago.

But the departures were abrupt and out of character from a typical diocesan transfer, which is usually announced in the Western New York Catholic monthly newspaper.

Three priests who were recently retired by the diocese under sudden and unusual circumstances have refused to speak with The News regarding their departures.

"I took a recommended retirement for health reasons, and I'm enjoying my retirement," one said. "All information has to come through the bishop."

Another priest, when asked about sexual abuse allegations made against him, responded, "I have nothing to say on that."

But a South Buffalo woman who says her brother was sexually abused by the priest expressed frustration that the diocese did not act when the incident occurred in the 1960s.

"My dad went to the pastor of our parish the next day and told him about the priest. The pastor assured us it was an isolated incident and that the priest would be getting help," the woman recalled.

Several months later, when the woman's father was in the Southern Tier on business, he noticed a newspaper photograph of the priest surrounded by children at a fund-raiser, the woman said.

"The 'help' they got priests in the past was to send them to the Southern Tier," the woman said.

A third priest hung up the telephone when contacted last week by The News.

No-tolerance policy

The recent removals have raised concerns among some priests that the national no-tolerance policy might be shortsighted and unforgiving.

"My concern is with priests who made a mistake 20, 30, 40 years ago, have gone to therapy and there's been no trouble since," said the Rev. John J. Mergenhagen, a retreat director who has been temporarily filling in at St. Joseph parish in Varysburg. "I don't understand that. How can this be? We're a church of sinners. Aren't we allowed to make a mistake, repent and straighten out our lives?"

The Rev. Robert Wood, former pastor of the small rural parish, was removed three weeks ago. Wood cited an incident 16 years ago as the reason for his removal.

The church, said Mergenhagen, should have compassion toward priests who reform their lives after making a mistake, although he added that there is no room in the priesthood for persistent offenders.

The Rev. Stephen Rossetti, president and chief executive officer of St. Luke Institute, a Catholic residential treatment facility for clergy, where many priests are evaluated and treated for a variety of disorders, said the church's approach to handling abuse cases was dismantled by the charter - even though it was working well for about 10 years.

Since 1985, the 320 priests treated at the institute for sexual abuse had less than a 5 percent relapse rate, Rossetti said.

He maintains that sending accused priests to intensive treatment, then placing them in ministries where they have no unsupervised contact with minors, might ultimately be safer for children than simply removing priests altogether.

"People say get rid of them. But the fact is, they've got to go somewhere," Rossetti said. "I was disappointed in the debate in the last year. People were not facing the tough questions.

"The key is, what's the goal? The goal has to be the protection of children."

Accused priests who are removed from ministry will no longer hold a position of priestly authority, but they might still have access to children, without monitoring by the church. They might also be less motivated in keeping up with their treatment, Rossetti said.

"The question is, is that better?" he said.