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## **Diocese Speaks out on Sex Abuse Claims**

Chancellor Says the Allegations Involve Small Number of Priests

By Dave Condren  
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Allegations of sexual abuse have been made against "a handful" of priests in the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo but no more than three have been proved to be true so far, Chancellor Robert J. Cunningham said today.

"There have been a handful of complaints. Not all of the investigations are closed," Monsignor Cunningham said. "There are three priests who have been publicly accused — three priests who have been placed on leave and their faculties suspended because of allegations of sexual abuse."

The chancellor said he was unwilling to "get into the numbers" regarding sexual abuse complaints.

"We are trying to investigate each allegation on a case by case basis," he said.

Furthermore, he said, the diocese has provided or is providing counseling for a few individuals who say they are victims of abuse by priests.

But the diocese has "never paid anyone" to settle an abuse case, Monsignor Cunningham added.

"To my knowledge every case has been investigated," said Monsignor Cunningham.

The chancellor answered questions about the problem within the ranks of Western New York's 375 active Catholic priests after The Buffalo News asked how many complaints have been made in the last three years and how many priests have been suspended for sexual misdeeds.

Although he acknowledged it might seem otherwise at times, Monsignor Cunningham insisted it is not the policy of the diocese to cover up cases of alleged sexual abuse by priests until someone blows the whistle.

But neither is it the policy to announce that allegations have been made against priests or that Bishop Edward D. Head has suspended or transferred clergy because of any kind of complaint made against them, he said.

"There is a difference between concealing and making public announcements. There is a need to respect the individual's (priest's) right to privacy, the church's right to handle its own affairs and the privacy of the victims and individuals who make the complaints," Monsignor Cunningham said.

The chancellor discussed the way the diocese handles abuse complaints after it acknowledged this week that the Rev. William F. White, former weekend assistant at St. Louis Parish, has been suspended for more than a year. The suspension occurred in February 1993, as the result of a complaint about sexual improprieties with a young man.

"We believe when a person is placed on leave and his faculties suspended, that's an internal decision," Monsignor Cunningham said. "We believe the church has a right to make decisions internally to maintain good order. I would think it is a common practice not to announce when people leave positions."

The initial complaint about Father White, which Monsignor Cunningham said Thursday actually involved two individuals, was made to the diocese early in 1993.

Father White was placed on leave "within a matter of days," with his authority to function as a priest suspended, he said.

The suspension was not disclosed by the diocese until another individual, using an alias, appeared on WKBW-TV Monday and claimed he had been sexually abused by Father White some 20 to 25 years ago in the South Buffalo home of the priest's parents.

Monsignor Cunningham said Thursday that the initial complaint about Father White, who has been sent to an out-of-state treatment facility, involved two individuals whom the priest had met when he lived at Annunciation Parish at Lafayette Avenue and Grant Street between 1982 and 1985.

The abuse allegedly began after Father White moved from that parish to serve as associate pastor of Queen of Heaven Parish, West Seneca.

Both of the victims have been provided counseling at diocesan expense and one of them remains in counseling, he said.

Monsignor Cunningham said the man who made the television allegations about Father White also has contacted the diocese.

"His name is not 'Kevin' but the story (told on television) was similar. Therefore, I think it was the same individual," he said. "We have offered him counseling and we understand he will accept it."

The chancellor said that some complaints are made with the understanding that a situation will be corrected without being made public, some are later withdrawn, some are investigated and found to be unsubstantiated and some result in action, including suspension.

"Not all complaints about priests have to do with sexual impropriety," he noted.

The other two priests about whom allegations of sexual abuse have been made are the Rev. Bernard M. Mach, former pastor of St. Mary's Parish, Lockport, and the Rev. John R. Aurelio, a former professor at Christ the King Seminary, East Aurora. Like Father White, they also have been suspended.

Father Mach has been named in a \$ 2 million civil suit filed by a Lockport family. It alleges that he sexually abused a 12-year-old boy in 1991 in the rectory of the Lockport parish.

In addition, three unidentified men have accused Fathers Mach and Aurelio of sodomizing them 15 or 20 years ago in a house the two priests shared in East Aurora.

The alleged victims were in their early teens at the time of the incidents. Father Aurelio allegedly has told Niagara County criminal investigators that the allegations are true.

Although the three men went public with their accusations in December, they have never contacted the diocese to lodge complaints or seek counseling or compensation, Monsignor Cunningham said.

Two other diocesan priests, the Rev. Michael R. Swartz and Monsignor Stanley A. Ropelski, are being investigated by outside agencies. They have not been accused of sexual impropriety.

Father Swartz, former parochial vicar of St. Christopher's Parish, Town of Tonawanda, is under investigation by authorities in Erie and Niagara counties in connection with the possible theft of money from that parish and from Sacred Heart Parish, Niagara Falls, where he offered Mass on Sunday evenings and helped members of his family count parish money.

Monsignor Cunningham said Father Swartz is on medical leave and is being treated for stress in a medical facility out of state.

Monsignor Ropelski, a former assistant chancellor for the diocese, is under investigation by the FBI and the Erie County district attorney's office in connection with use and distribution of small amounts of cocaine, and with possible misappropriation of parish funds. He resigned in August as pastor of St. Michael the Archangel Parish, Lackawanna, and is on administrative leave with his priestly faculties suspended.

**CORRECTION-DATE:** March 12, 1994, Saturday, Final Edition

**CORRECTION:**

Monsignor Robert J. Cunningham, chancellor of the Buffalo Catholic Diocese, said Friday that allegations of sexual abuse have been made against "a handful" of priests over the last three years but only three complaints have resulted so far in suspensions.

"There have been a handful of complaints. Not all of the investigations are closed," Monsignor Cunningham said. "There are three priests who have been publicly accused — three priests who have been placed on leave and their faculties suspended" while investigations of complaints against them continue.

The chancellor said every complaint made to the diocese is investigated and counseling is being provided to a few individuals who say they are victims of abuse by priests.

The diocese has "never paid anyone" to settle an abuse case, Monsignor Cunningham added.

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