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Diocese Hit by New Allegations about Priest

Says It Had No Knowledge of Claim That Father White Advised Baby Killer to Lie

By Dan Herbeck and Dave Condren
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The Catholic Diocese of Buffalo should have been aware 15 years ago that one of its priests had tried to cover up the murder of a baby, two former Buffalo homicide detectives say. Diocesan officials vigorously deny the claims.

The detectives say they told a monsignor and another priest that they suspected the Rev. William F. White III had advised a baby killer to make a false police report to cover up the slaying. The monsignor and priest also were told about allegations that Father White had been sexually abusing teen-agers at a juvenile detention home, the two detectives say.

"They had a giant warning sign put up in front of their face back in 1979, and they decided to just ignore it, cover it up and hope it goes away," said Florian Skomski, a retired detective who said he warned church officials about Father White during the 1979 murder probe. "And it didn't go away."

The detectives' recollections add to a growing list of accusations against Father White and also to statements that the diocese was told much earlier than last year about the problems involving the priest.

Father White, 51, was suspended from his priestly functions in 1993 and sent to an out-of-state treatment facility following charges that he had sexually abused two former altar boys from Annunciation Church, a West Side parish where he served in the early 1980s.

Diocesan officials insist the detectives are either lying or mistaken and that the information was never given to Bishop Edward D. Head.

"It's absolutely not true," said Monsignor Robert J. Cunningham, chancellor of the diocese. "That information was never conveyed to the diocese."

But the detectives said that in 1979 they told the late Monsignor Franklin Kelliher, former director of the Working Boys Home on Vermont Street, about Father White's attempted coverup of the baby killing and about sexual-abuse allegations. They said they also informed another priest, whom they could not identify.

And in 1987, the diocese was told about Father White's strange behavior with two West Seneca boys -- ages 13 and 15 -- on the night of their father's wake.

One of the boys recalls that Father White ordered the two boys to disrobe and spank each other.

Following that complaint, Father White was transferred to another parish and sent for counseling. But the priest's actions were not proof that he was involved in physically molesting boys, Monsignor Cunningham said, and therefore no other action was taken against him.

Since Father White was suspended from the priesthood last year, however, The Buffalo News has been made aware of a total of 11 boys and teen-agers he allegedly molested or abused since 1961.

Not all of those incidents have been formally reported to the diocese, Monsignor Cunningham said.

"If people do not report these incidents to us, we can't take any action on them," he said.

Diocesan officials insist that, over the years, they have reacted quickly and properly to any complaints about Father White.

"Any time we get a complaint about a priest, we investigate, we confront the priest about it, and if needed, we send the priest for counseling," Monsignor Cunningham said.

Such complaints are never swept under the rug, he added.

Critics disagree.

The two detectives, both Catholics, said they are shocked and angry that, for 14 years after the baby killing, Father White was allowed to continue in the priesthood and continue working with children.

"The church said they were going to move him (Father White) to a home up near Toronto," one of the detectives recalled.

The baby-killing case involved Stanley Zamiela, an emotionally disturbed man who had tortured and beaten to death his infant son, Walter, in a Black Rock home, said Skomski and another detective, who spoke on the condition he would not be named. .

Zamiela told police that when he called his friend Father White to tell him about the killing, Father White suggested he should falsely tell authorities the baby died "a crib death."

Skomski and the other detective said they clearly recall several things about the case:

The homicide was one of the most grisly they had ever investigated. Stanley Zamiela, 24 at the time, admitted that he put his 4-month-old son in a refrigerator, threw him against a wall, punched him, kicked him and seared his mouth with a hot light bulb because he would not stop crying.

Zamiela told police that several years earlier, Father White had sexually abused him and another teenage boy staying at the Working Boys Home.

A tall priest, whom the detectives believed represented the diocese, was sent to the Homicide Bureau office at Police Headquarters. They said they do not recall the priest's name, but do recall him being angry when they told him about Zamiela's statements regarding Father White.

They also spoke at the time with Monsignor Kelliher, who told the detectives that he already was familiar with Father White's improper conduct with youths at the Working Boys Home.

"Monsignor Kelliher said he caught White whipping four nude boys in the middle of the night," the other investigator recalled. "He said he tried to get him reprimanded, but was told to mind his own business."

The detectives initially wanted to arrest Father White for hindering prosecution, but did not because their superiors in the department ordered them "not to charge White with anything."

"I will never forget sitting across the table from this guy, hearing his story of what he did to that baby," Skomski said. "You wanted to grab this guy, drag him across the table and beat him within an inch of his life. When he told us about the priest telling him to report it as a crib death, that made it even worse.

"We were really (angry) to think that a priest would be involved in anything like this, especially when it seemed like he was trying to cover up a murder," Skomski recalled last week.

Zamiela eventually pleaded guilty to manslaughter and was sentenced to four to 12 years in state prison.

During a lengthy interview at the Chancery last week, a spokesman for Bishop Head denied any conduct by Father White was covered up, insisting that none of the information about his involvement in the Zamiela case ever got to the Chancery.

If Bishop Head had been aware of the allegations, the conduct would have been considered "unacceptable" and immediate action would have been taken against Father White, Monsignor Cunningham said.

Monsignor Kelliher died in 1985, and there is no way of verifying his discussions with the two detectives, Monsignor Cunningham added. Monsignor Kelliher never told his superiors that he suspected Father White was abusing youths, the chancellor said.

If Monsignor Kelliher and another priest did talk to homicide detectives about the case, they were not serving as representatives of the bishop, Monsignor Cunningham said.

Bishop Donald W. Trautman of the Diocese of Erie, Pa., who was Bishop Head's top assistant in 1979, also insists that police never informed the Diocese about the allegations.

"This is scandalous . . . I did not go to Police Headquarters on anything for (Father) Bill White. We had no information on Bill White," Bishop Trautman said. "Father White was not known to be the bad person he is now.

"The diocese would never ask the police to cover up or hinder a police investigation."

Buffalo attorney Edward C. Cosgrove, who was Erie County district attorney at the time of the Zamiela investigation, said that he was aware of allegations that Father White had suggested reporting the incident as a crib death.

But Cosgrove said he was never told that Zamiela had made statements implicating Father White in sexual abuse. If the allegations were made, he said, police should have pursued them. "There was no one back then that would have prevented the police from doing their job," he said.

An examination of diocesan records shows that Father White has had four different assignments since 1979.

But only one of the transfers, in 1987, was the result of a complaint made about Father White's involvement with youths, the diocese said.

To the best of his knowledge, Monsignor Cunningham said, the diocese received no "credible" complaints about Father White until 1987. That is when the West Seneca family called the Chancery to complain about Father White's conduct with two boys -- former altar boys from Queen of Heaven Church in West Seneca -- on the night of their father's wake.

From a "clinical" point of view, Father White's actions involving the West Seneca boys contained no proof that he physically molested them, Monsignor Cunningham said. "It was unacceptable. But it was our understanding there was no physical contact with the boys," Monsignor Cunningham said.

But the West Seneca incident prompted the bishop to move Father White to St. Louis Church on Main Street, where he offered Masses and also worked as chaplain at a nursing home, Monsignor Cunningham said. St. Louis was chosen because it is a parish with a relatively small number of families with children and it is located directly across the street from the Chancery, he said.

Monsignor Cunningham's explanation of the events angered a Buffalo-area woman whose complaints

about Father White in early 1993 finally resulted in his suspension.

The woman, mother of two boys who said they were abused by Father White in the 1980s while they were serving as altar boys at Annunciation Church, said the diocese only suspended Father White after she confronted Monsignor Cunningham with tape recordings of Father White talking with both her sons.

When she first contacted Monsignor Cunningham, he told her the diocese had no record of previous complaints about Father White, the woman said.

"The diocese, from the bishop on down, lied to us," she said.

The woman said she believes the two former homicide detectives' statements about the Stanley Zamiela homicide case and wishes the diocese had acted 14 years earlier to suspend Father White.

"It makes me furious. If they (the Diocese) did what they should have done, my kids would be normal. They should have sent him away and left him away," the woman said. "They should have said, 'Everyone abused by Father White, come forward.' But they didn't. They covered it up and they still are covering it up."

The woman did acknowledge that the diocese has helped her two sons, who have had drug, alcohol and criminal problems. She estimated the diocese has spent \$ 60,000 on counseling for them.

There is still another incident involving the priest. Father White's name cropped up in news reports in a mob-related fraud case in federal court in the early 1980s. Father White was not indicted, but federal prosecutors said he served as a director of Onyx Construction Corp., a firm that falsely listed itself as a minority contractor in an effort to win lucrative construction contracts on the Metro Rail line. Ronald Fino, a former Laborers Local 210 official who is now a mob informant for the FBI, pleaded guilty to fraud charges in the case, along with two other men.

"I was reading the newspaper reports on that Local 210 thing and was really surprised to see this guy (Father White) was still a priest," Skomski said. "I thought they would defrock him after what happened in that Zamiela case."

Only the Vatican in Rome can remove someone from the priesthood, and only with the priest's signature, Monsignor Cunningham said.

"Once a person is ordained as a priest, they're always a priest. It's an indelible mark, unless they are laicized," he said. He said the diocese cannot force someone to leave the priesthood.

"The action we have taken against Father White is the most severe action we can take," Monsignor Cunningham said.

"It's unlikely he'll ever function as a priest again, either here or in another diocese," he said.