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Diocese Says 6 Priests Removed in 10 Years Only One Probed by Grand Jury

By Lou Michel
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Six Buffalo-area priests who were accused of pedophilia in the past decade were forced out of the priesthood, the Buffalo Catholic Diocese says.

Church officials initially used terms like "out-of-state treatment," "medical leave," "suspension" and "retirement" to describe their fates.

But none of them is now functioning as a priest, said Kevin A. Keenan, director of communications for the diocese.

"All have had their faculties (priestly authority) permanently removed," Keenan said.

He added that no priest during the past 20 years was merely transferred to another assignment when there was "credible evidence of inappropriate sexual behavior with children.

Monsignor Robert J. Cunningham, chancellor of the diocese, said during an interview in February that a total of "12 to 15 priests have been accused of sexual impropriety in the last 20 years. Not all of those cases involved children, he said.

The diocese will not say how the remaining cases -- other than the six that became public -- were handled.

In Boston, where a major scandal has erupted in recent months, many of the 80 or more accused priests were shuttled from one parish to another after allegations were made. The names of many of them recently were turned over to police.

In Buffalo, of the six priests accused publicly of sexual abuse and forced to leave the priesthood, only one became the target of a criminal investigation. A grand jury did not indict the priest, apparently for lack of evidence.

In the other five cases, the accusations were so old that the statute of limitations -- five years -- had run out, sources indicated.

Cunningham also stressed, "To our knowledge, there are no pedophile priests working in the Buffalo Diocese."

That may be due, in part, to steps initiated more than a decade ago, including the "Policy Relating to Sexual or Physical Misconduct," adopted in 1990 under then-Bishop Edward D. Head. The policy, which takes a relatively tough stance on sexual abuse, requires employees of the diocese who have knowledge of sexual or physical misconduct by diocesan personnel to comply "with applicable reporting or other requirements of state and local laws," unless doing so would violate the priest-penitent relationship of confession.

State law, however, does not currently mandate priests or other clergy who become aware of sexual abuse of children to report it to civil authorities, as is the case with certain other professions, including

teachers and doctors. Cunningham has said he is not aware that the diocese has ever reported allegations of sexual abuse of children by priests to police.

In addition, priests in the local diocese accused of sexual misconduct are immediately placed on administrative leave while the diocese investigates to determine if there is credible evidence.

When such evidence is found, the priest is sent for therapy or counseling. His priestly functions are suspended, preventing him from celebrating Mass or performing other clerical duties.

In the most recent cases from the 1990s, all the priests accused of pedophilia were permanently removed from active ministry, Keenan said.

Cases against priests

In the Buffalo Diocese, lay people and clergy were shocked in 1993 when two well-known priests were accused of sexual attacks on teenagers.

The initial allegation involved the Rev. Bernard M. Mach, former pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church, Lockport, in December of that year.

He was accused of showing pornographic movies to a 12-year-old boy and forcing himself on the boy in the parish rectory in 1991.

Once the case became public, it unleashed a series of other complaints against Mach and his friend, the Rev. John R. Aurelio, author of several children's books with a Christian theme. Other young men came forward, claiming the priests had abused them as teens years earlier in an East Aurora home.

The Niagara County Sheriff's Department conducted a criminal investigation into the 12-year-old's allegations against Mach. But evidence presented to a grand jury proved insufficient, and Mach was not indicted.

A \$2 million civil suit against Mach and the diocese was eventually settled, but details of the settlement were never made public.

The allegations against Mach and Aurelio were followed by allegations against four other priests.

In March 1994, diocesan officials confirmed that the Rev. William F. White had been suspended a year earlier after he was accused of sexually abusing a young boy in the 1970s. After his name became public, additional allegations were made against White.

Like some of the Boston priests, White was transferred in 1987 from Queen of Heaven Parish in West Seneca to St. Louis Parish in Buffalo after he was accused of bizarre behavior with two young boys in their home on the night of their father's wake.

When The Buffalo News learned in 1994 of that transfer, Cunningham said that White had been evaluated by independent professionals and transferred on their recommendation because there was no evidence of physical contact with the boys.

In April 1994, The News learned that the Rev. Loville N. Martlock had been placed on "medical leave" the previous October for allegedly molesting an 8-year-old boy some 20 years earlier.

In July 1994, a \$2 million lawsuit was filed by Christopher Szufflita against the diocese and the Rev. Joseph Friel, accusing the priest of repeatedly molesting him in the 1960s when he was an adolescent.

In another sex abuse lawsuit against the diocese in 1995, a former Buffalo woman sued for \$20 million, claiming she was repeatedly sexually attacked by the Rev. Robert J. Beisinger. The diocese

settled the claim the following year with Colleen McMullin Ptak for an undisclosed sum of money.

Dealing with offenders

What happened to the priests?

Mach and Aurelio now live in Florida and no longer function as priests.

White, whose priestly authority also was lifted, lives out of state.

Martlock also lives out of state and, according to diocesan officials, is no longer functioning as a priest.

Beisinger, who lives in Buffalo, was allowed to resign as a pastor of St. Aloysius Gonzaga Parish in Cheektowaga and later retired. He, too, no longer performs priestly duties.

Friel died in 1995, not long after the allegations were made against him.

Except for Mach, none of the priests accused of sexual abuse was the subject of a criminal investigation, apparently because neither the diocese nor the victims reported the incidents to police.

The Buffalo Diocese indicates that these cases, plus a few more that never became public, perhaps 12 to 15 in all, are the only ones that have occurred in the last 20 years. And while acknowledging that even one case is too many, the diocese points out that hundreds of priests have served the diocese during that time.

Bishop Henry J. Mansell told a packed St. Joseph's Cathedral at a Holy Week Mass, "To the extent of my knowledge, there have not been incidents of clergy sexual abuse of minors in our diocese in recent years."

Mansell, who became bishop here in 1995 after the allegations in the early and mid-1990s, called sexual abuse of children despicable, repugnant, deplorable, a grievous sin and a crime. And he urged continued vigilance to assure that the safety of children remains a high priority in the church.

But in the same sermon, he also criticized recent media coverage of the sex abuse scandals facing the Catholic Church.

Mansell complained that the good work of the many other priests who are faithful to their responsibilities goes unnoticed by the media.

"There are more than 46,000 priests in the United States," he said. "It's a minimal fraction of a fraction who have been perpetrating these kinds of tragedies. It's important to realize that."

Victims' perspective

Victims of abuse by priests say the horror never ends.

Since January, when the scandal in the Boston Archdiocese first became national news, Ptak said her nightmares about abuse have returned.

"It reminded me that I have never gotten an apology from the Buffalo Diocese and I have never been able to confront my abuser," said Ptak, a former Buffalo resident who now lives out of state.

In the federal court suit filed in 1995, she alleged Beisinger sexually assaulted and abused her during a school trip to Chicago in 1974. At the time, she was a 15-year-old student at Baker Victory High School in Lackawanna and a member of the school's "Guys and Dolls" color guard and drill team.

Beisinger, a teacher at the school, was director and coach of the drill team, as well as chaperon on the trip.

Although Ptak accepted a cash payment to settle the suit, she insists that money was never the issue.

"All I ever wanted was an apology and for the diocese to take ownership. There would not have been a lawsuit if the diocese had accepted responsibility. There would never be enough money to take the place of an apology," she said.

While the diocese says its policy is to offer to provide or pay for counseling for victims of abuse, Ptak said she was never reimbursed for private counseling she required until her lawsuit was settled.

Screenings and seminars

The diocese, which currently has 448 active priests, says it is doing everything it can to prevent sexual misconduct by priests or any other employees who serve its 713,000 Catholics.

Diocesan officials have been reluctant to compare their handling of the problem with what has been done in Boston or elsewhere. But in the recent interview, Cunningham pointed out that Buffalo has implemented a number of steps to prevent similar problems here.

These include a "written policy on sexual misconduct, careful screening of candidates for the seminary and employment and six to eight seminars a year" for new employees and volunteers addressing sexual misconduct.

"When a religious order priest comes into the diocese, the bishop receives a letter from his superior stating that he has no record of inappropriate behavior and he is a priest in good standing," Cunningham said.

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