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Return of Priest Blocked by Parents

Albany-- Some Sought Help to Keep out the Rev. Louis Douglas, Named in an Abuse Lawsuit, in 1993

By Andrew Tilghman
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In the spring of 1993, a group of parents at St. Catherine of Siena Church met with Bishop Howard Hubbard to discuss their concerns about the pastor's behavior around young boys.

Those concerns were sparked by a family that had complained to the diocese and removed their son from the parish school because of "unwarranted special attention" that the Rev. Louis Douglas was giving the child, according to parents who attended the meeting.

"What we were trying to do was to get them just to face the fact that there was a problem," said Patricia Brace, 47, of Albany, the mother of two young boys at the church school then. Brace recalled that she and other parents were outraged to hear that Douglas had been sent away for treatment and was expected to return to the parish.

"When we realized where he had gone, we went in and said, 'This man is not coming back,' " said Marcia Preusser, who also had two boys at the church school and attended the meeting with the bishop.

Last week, church officials declined to comment on the meeting. Douglas, who is now 73, is one of four priests named in a lawsuit filed Wednesday, which accused him of making sexual advances toward a Schenectady teenager in the 1970s.

Douglas left his post at St. Catherine of Siena and officially retired in 1993. He moved to Wilmington, Del., where until last week he was saying mass occasionally. Immediately after the Diocese of Wilmington learned about the lawsuit, it temporarily suspended Douglas in that jurisdiction.

The Albany Diocese, which remains Douglas's home diocese and which initially took no action, on Friday announced that Douglas -- as well as two other priests named in the suit, the Rev. Alan Jupin and Donald Ophals -- were removed from active ministry at their own request.

In 1993, the concerned parents at the St. Catherine of Siena parish contacted Judith Condo, director of the Albany County Crime Victim and Sexual Violence Center. They talked about implementing a sexual-abuse prevention program for students and teachers at the school, which runs from pre-school through eighth grade.

"There were efforts to do something there," Condo said last week, recalling her exchange with the group of parents a decade ago.

Condo said rules of client confidentiality prevent her from discussing what prompted the parents to approach her. It was the only instance she could recall in the past 20 years when parents from a Catholic school contacted her about such a program.

Condo said she believes church leaders blocked the idea.

"The diocese is different from a (public) school district. It has a different management system. It's not

like the school board. Anything that would take place in the schools ultimately would go to the bishop," she said. "And my guess is there was the hiring of someone else, and they did not want to go into the public sector for these services."

The diocese disclosed for the first time last week that it had investigated another complaint about Douglas in 1992 concerning allegations of sexual abuse that occurred in the 1960s. Church officials said they later agreed to a financial settlement even though their investigation found "whatever happened, it was something other than sexual abuse," Ken Goldfarb, a church spokesman, said Wednesday.

The lawsuit filed in state Supreme Court in Schenectady by attorney John Aretakis includes allegations about Douglas.

"Douglas was credibly accused of inappropriate sexual contact with another male under the age of 18 while at St. Catherine of Siena or other church assignment," the lawsuit said.

Parents at St. Catherine's said their pressure kept the priest out of the church.

"We said this is absolutely not acceptable. They said, 'OK, he can't come back,' and that's when Doyle came as a permanent replacement," Preusser said, referring to the Rev. Kenneth Doyle. Doyle, who is a lawyer and the diocesan chancellor, took over as pastor after Douglas left the prominent Albany parish.

Several months later, in October 1993, the Albany Diocese announced for the first time a policy concerning clergy sexual abuse. It stated that the bishop could place an accused priest on administrative leave and reassign him after treatment and a doctor's evaluation.

That same year, the Rev. Peter Walsh of St. Anthony's Shrine Church in Troy was arrested in August in New Jersey for allegedly exposing himself to young boys. Walsh was a Franciscan friar, not a diocesan priest.

Earlier this year, church leaders said it was also in 1993 that Hubbard asked the Rev. Dozia Wilson to resign from the priesthood. The bishop had known about Wilson's problems with young boys as far back as the late 1970s and had permitted him to work in parish ministries.

In 1996, Hubbard wrote a letter to church officials in Wilmington, indicating that Douglas was a priest in good standing and fit for public ministry.

Following disclosures of sexual abuse by priests in dioceses nationwide, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in June 2002 adopted a zero-tolerance policy for any priest believed to have abused a child.

The policy, which Hubbard initially opposed, applies retroactively to all priests, no matter when the alleged abuse occurred.

On Thursday, Schenectady County District Attorney Robert Carney said he will investigate allegations contained in the new lawsuit that Douglas was among those who encouraged one of the other priests named in the suit to stalk and harass the man who brought the suit to prevent him from coming forward with his allegations of abuse in the 1970s.

Since 1993, at least 16 priests have left the ministry due to allegations they had sexually abused a child, church officials said. The diocese does not say how many others remain under investigation. Douglas served at St. Catherine of Siena alongside the Rev. Joseph Romano, who was removed from active ministry in February due to allegations that he had sexually abused a child.

Douglas also served at St. Claire's in Colonie in the 1970s and at St. Mary's in Oneonta in the 1980s until he began working at St. Catherine's of Siena, church records show.

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