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New Battle in Priest Vs. Priest Case

By Stephanie Saul
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A New Jersey priest who accused one of his brethren of sexually abusing him says he is facing retaliation through a rarely used Catholic Church legal proceeding, and a high-ranking Queens monsignor is participating in the bid to have him ousted.

The Rev. John Bambrick said he faces a possible church trial on defamation of character charges filed against him this week by the Rev. Anthony Eremito, a priest who formerly worked in both Manhattan and the Bronx. Eremito's canon lawyer is Msgr. William Varvaro, pastor of St. Margaret's Roman Catholic Church in Middle Village.

Bambrick said the allegations against him are an attempt to prevent him from additional airing of his allegations, detailed in a story in Newsday last month.

"This is revictimization and completely, totally contrary to the new charter," said Bambrick, who said he faces possible removal as pastor St. Thomas More Church in Manalapan, N.J., or the priesthood altogether.

Eremito's complaint is filed with the Diocese of Trenton, officials confirmed, and under normal procedure would be heard in secret by a panel of priests appointed by its bishop, John Smith.

"What's so unusual is the canon law process is so rarely used," said the Rev. Thomas Doyle, a canon lawyer and expert on church sexual abuse. "He's using the process. Whether he succeeds or not is another story," said Doyle, noting that Eremito will have to prove that the abuse never occurred.

One reason the process is rare, according to Doyle, is that very few canon lawyers are familiar with the code that allows one priest to seek action against another. Steven Emery, a spokesman for the Trenton diocese, said Eremito will be represented by Varvaro.

Varvaro was traveling outside the country and could not be reached, his office said.

The Brooklyn diocese, which includes Queens, said that Bishop Thomas Daily was not aware of Varvaro's role in the case but noted that Varvaro is frequently consulted on issues of canon law.

"The important thing is that the Diocese of Brooklyn has nothing to do with this," said Frank DeRosa, a spokesman for Daily. Bambrick had feared Varvaro's involvement indicated powerful church figures wanted his removal. Varvaro holds the title protonotary apostolic, the highest-ranking level of monsignor.

In an interview last month, Bambrick alleged he was abused at age 15 by Eremito, who served at churches in both the Bronx and Manhattan during the 1980s and early 1990s.

Eremito was on the list of alleged sexual abusers turned over to prosecutors by the Archdiocese of New York, according to its spokesman, Joseph Zwilling.

Eremito's last job in New York was in the early 1990s at Holy Cross Church on West 42nd Street.

Bambrick said he complained to Cardinal John O'Connor about Eremito in the early 1990s. The late cardinal assured him that Eremito would never again wear clerical garb or say Mass publicly, Bambrick said.

Despite that promise, Bambrick said, he later found Eremito saying Mass in New Jersey and, recently, found him working as a hospital chaplain in Lubbock, Texas.

Last week, Eremito resigned his hospital job. He has not returned phone calls from Newsday.

Bambrick is seeking Eremito's "laicization," or return to the lay state.

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