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Hospice Operator Fires Counselor

It Dismissed the Priest after Learning He Had Been Accused of Sex Abuse and Suspended in New York

By David O'Reilly
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A local hospice provider yesterday dismissed a Catholic priest it had hired as a bereavement counselor, saying it did not know he was an accused sex abuser.

Odyssey HealthCare of Philadelphia Inc., based in Blue Bell, said it immediately removed the Rev. Anthony J. Eremito, who is about 63, after learning that he had been suspended from ministry nearly four years ago by the Archdiocese of New York.

"He was in our employment for about three months as a bereavement counselor or coordinator," said Brad Bickham, general counsel for Odyssey's parent company, based in Dallas.

Bickham said Odyssey had conducted standard background checks on Eremito before hiring him but found no evidence of wrongdoing "because he was never criminally charged" with sex abuse.

"Unfortunately, this kind of conduct is not easily ascertainable," Bickham said.

Eremito could not be reached for comment.

Bickham said Odyssey had "absolutely no" complaints of improper behavior lodged against Eremito during his employment. He said that he did not know whether Eremito's job would have taken him into private homes and that Eremito "probably spent most of his time in an office."

He said he did not know whether Eremito had presented himself as a Catholic priest when he applied for work with Odyssey.

Joseph Zwilling, a spokesman for the New York archdiocese, said yesterday that Eremito had had no assignment since the early 1990s and that his faculties as a priest were removed in 2002.

Priests whose faculties have been removed are not allowed by the Catholic Church to present themselves as priests or wear clerical clothes.

Eremito has denied abusing minors and is legally challenging efforts by the archdiocese to strip him of his status as a priest.

His employment at Odyssey was revealed yesterday in a statement released by the Survivors' Network of Those Abused by Priests, the activist group known as SNAP, based in St. Louis.

Among those who have publicly accused Eremito of sex abuse is the Rev. John Bembrick, pastor of St. Thomas More Roman Catholic Church in Manalapan, N.J.

Bembrick, 38, says Eremito abused him for about six months in 1980 when he was a 15-year-old altar boy in Matawan, N.J., and Eremito was assigned to a Bronx parish.

"He does move around," Bembrick said in a phone interview yesterday. Bembrick also serves as SNAP's legislative director in New Jersey.

"Whenever I find him," Bembrick said, "I notify his employers." He said bereavement counselors and hospice chaplains "have access to children, and they need to be protected."

SNAP said in its release that Eremito had worked as recently as 2002 at Covenant Medical Center, a children's hospital in Lubbock, Texas.

Covenant Medical Center did not return a call seeking confirmation of that information.

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