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## Egan Shutting Door on Suspended Priests

By Gary Stern  
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A former Putnam County priest is now working at a Dutchess County home-supply store, signaling that Cardinal Edward Egan has quietly started to banish priests accused of sexually abusing minors.

The Archdiocese of New York has been silent about the fates of more than a dozen priests who were removed from their assignments last year because of abuse allegations against them. But Egan met with many of the accused priests in August and told all but a few that they cannot return to ministry, according to people familiar with several cases.

Among those who received the bad news were the Rev. Ralph LaBelle, former pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Putnam Lake, and Monsignor Charles Kavanagh, one of New York's most high-profile priests, who led fund raising for the archdiocese and is close to many suburban residents who are strong financial supporters of the church.

LaBelle had no comment when reached at his new job Friday. "I'm working," he said.

Kavanagh could not be reached for comment. But several associates, including the Rev. George Kuhn, pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Yonkers, said Kavanagh is considering whether to appeal his dismissal from ministry to the Vatican.

"I know he's upset, and many of us are upset at the decision," Kuhn said. "If I were him, I'd get a canon lawyer and fight it."

Joseph Zwilling, spokesman for Egan, repeated the cardinal's position of recent months, saying that any decisions to permanently remove priests from ministry will be announced in the archdiocese's monthly newspaper, Catholic New York.

"As Cardinal Egan has indicated, when these cases are finalized he will make a statement in Catholic New York," Zwilling said. "He still intends to do that."

Zwilling would not discuss LaBelle's or Kavanagh's cases.

Word that Egan has made his decisions about many of the suspended priests — offering severance packages to some — has been spreading through the archdiocese since Labor Day weekend. Many were surprised to see no announcement regarding the priests in this month's issue of Catholic New York.

David Cerulli, co-director of the New York chapter of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, known as SNAP, the main advocacy group for abuse victims, said he could not understand why the archdiocese would keep a single decision secret.

"There is a danger in kicking a priest out and not telling anybody," Cerulli said. "It's like shuffling them to a new parish. They can start over as somebody else. Keeping things secret is the pattern of the past."

LaBelle had been Sacred Heart's pastor for more than two years when he was removed in April 2002 at the height of the sex-abuse scandal in the Catholic Church.

A woman in the parish had complained to the archdiocese about LaBelle's developing an inappropriate relationship with her son, beginning when he was 15. The mother said LaBelle had bought her son three beepers, a cell phone, cigarettes and snowboarding equipment, and often treated him to fast-food meals.

But there were no allegations of sexual contact. A day after LaBelle's removal, many parishioners applauded him when his name was mentioned during Mass. Some in the parish later declared LaBelle to be "cleared" when Putnam County District Attorney Kevin Wright, who acknowledged investigating LaBelle, did not bring criminal charges against him.

LaBelle's downfall came when the archdiocese discovered in recent months that he had contacted the woman's son, despite being told not to by church officials, the mother and others following the case said.

The mother said last week she has mixed feelings about LaBelle's being removed from ministry because it is not clear whether the archdiocese is in contact with him.

"I wish they would have put him somewhere and got him some help," she said. "If the archdiocese is not taking care of him, he can do what he pleases."

Joe D'Imperio, a longtime Sacred Heart parishioner who has followed LaBelle's case closely, agreed that the archdiocese should maintain some connection with priests removed from ministry.

"I would have preferred that the church keep the reins on him," D'Imperio said.

Kavanagh was the archdiocese's vicar of development and pastor at St. Raymond's Church, a large Bronx parish, when he was removed in May 2002. He ran the annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner, a major fund-raising event for the archdiocese, and was involved with other high-profile programs, such as the Inner-City Scholarship Fund.

He was accused of improperly touching a student two decades ago when he was assigned to Cathedral Preparatory Seminary, then in Manhattan.

In other parishes where priests were removed last year, parishioners have been anxiously waiting for word on the priests' fates. At St. John the Baptist in Yonkers, supporters of the Rev. John Lennon, the former pastor, saw the writing on the wall in June, when a new pastor, Monsignor Christopher Maloney, was appointed.

At St. Joan of Arc Church in Sloatsburg, it has gradually become clear that former pastor the Rev. John Gallant will not be back, said Evelyn Spina, a parishioner who led a petition drive for Gallant's return.

"He's almost 70, so people expect he will retire," she said.

There is no telling when the more recent cases of two West Harrison clergymen might be resolved. The Rev. Lawrence Inzeo, former pastor of St. Anthony of Padua Church, and Deacon Arthur Manzione, a part-time deacon at St. Anthony and the archdiocese's associate secretary for education, were both removed from ministry last month.

Each was recently accused of sexual abuse against a minor 20 years ago when both were assigned to Sacred Heart Church in Newburgh. The allegations against Inzeo and Manzione are not related, the archdiocese said.