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Island Priest Removed over Sex Abuse Claim

No Criminal Charges for St. Patrick's Cleric Who Denies Allegation

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A priest from St. Patrick's R.C. Church has been removed from ministry after a 17-year-old boy, now 18, alleged the priest touched him inappropriately in January.

The Rev. Christopher Pliauplis, 57, an assistant at the Richmond parish who was in charge of the religious education program, denies the allegation.

"I've been accused of something I did not do," he said. "This boy is accusing me falsely."

The teen was one of several high school students who teach religious education classes at St. Patrick's. According to Joseph Sorrentino, attorney for the accuser's family, and Mario Gallucci, the priest's attorney, the boy alleges that on Jan. 18, as they passed each other in a school hallway, Father Pliauplis grabbed his genitals.

The boy and his parents complained to the Archdiocese of New York. Father Pliauplis also was interviewed, and in March was placed on leave and removed from the parish .

The boy's family also brought the allegation to the office of District Attorney Daniel Donovan but decided not to pursue an investigation, according to spokesman William Smith. No charges were filed and no further action is planned. Smith said he could not comment further on the case.

Sorrentino said the family decided not to pursue a legal remedy because their foremost concern was protecting other young people by having the priest removed from the parish.

On Monday, the archdiocesan review board recommended to Cardinal Edward Egan that the priest "not return to ministry," said Joseph Zwilling, director of communications for the archdiocese.

"The cardinal has accepted that recommendation," Zwilling said. Father Pliauplis was advised on Tuesday that he would not be returned to ministry and "cannot present himself as a priest."

Father Pliauplis' only option is to appeal the cardinal's decision to the Vatican.

Gallucci said he is in the process of retaining a canon lawyer -- someone schooled in the laws of the church -- and the three will travel to Rome to appeal.

The decision to remove Father Pliauplis from ministry has left the family "relieved that the archdiocese has taken the proper action and that this unfortunate episode is behind their child," Sorrentino said.

In a phone call to the Advance, Father Pliauplis, ordained 19 years ago, said he is "devastated" by the allegations.

The priest said he has never before been accused of impropriety, which was confirmed by the archdiocese. The organization Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests (S.N.A.P.) had no prior

complaints against him and his name is not on a nationwide database of accused and convicted priests.

Father Pliauplis "can account for every single minute of that day," Gallucci said, adding that when the incident allegedly took place, another student and a maintenance worker were in the hallway, and 40 parents were in the auditorium nearby, where Father Pliauplis later gave a talk on the importance of attending mass.

According to Gallucci, Father Pliauplis began his religious life as a brother with an order in Steubenville, Ohio, but left to become a registered nurse for three years. He was ordained as a priest in 1987 in the Diocese of Steubenville and transferred to Long Island when his mother, who lived there, became ill.

He later was accepted as a priest in the New York archdiocese, assigned to St. Anthony's Church in Nanuet, Rockland County. Three years ago, he was transferred to St. James the Apostle/Our Lady of the Lake Mount Carmel in Carmel, Putnam County.

Father Pliauplis was assigned to St. Patrick's about 18 months ago. Monsignor John McCarthy, pastor, did not return calls from the Advance.

In 2001, the Rev. John Albino, an assistant at St. Patrick's, was one of four priests accused of sexually abusing a Bronx teen-ager. Father Albino had been assigned to a Bronx church at the time. He was sent to a treatment facility after a lawsuit was filed against him, and later removed from ministry.

Gallucci said he believes Father Pliauplis has been "railroaded."

"I think the archdiocese, under the current climate, feels it needs to make an example out of Father Pliauplis," he said. "There is not one piece of evidence to support his accuser. They are taking away his priesthood, and we are fighting it."

Sorrentino said the alleged victim feels vindicated.

"The action taken by the archdiocese shows they found him to be credible," he contended.

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