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Priest Suspended after Sex Abuse Accusation

By Daniel J. Wakin
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Cardinal Edward M. Egan has suspended a Westchester pastor who has been accused of sexually abusing a minor at least 20 years ago, the Archdiocese of New York said yesterday.

The priest, the Rev. Lawrence C. Inzeo of St. Anthony of Padua Church in West Harrison, N.Y., is the first to be suspended in the archdiocese since last summer, when the nationwide sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church was more intense.

An archdiocesan official told parishioners at Sunday Mass that Father Inzeo, their pastor of eight years, had been barred from the ministry.

The action was taken about a week after someone called the archdiocese and said a male relative — a minor at the time — had been sexually abused by Father Inzeo, said the spokesman for the archdiocese, Joseph Zwilling.

The abuse was alleged to have taken place during the priest's first assignment, at the Church of the Sacred Heart in Newburgh, in Orange County. Father Inzeo served there for five years after his ordination in 1978. He also had assignments at two other Westchester parishes, the Church of the Resurrection in Rye and St. Francis of Assisi in Mount Kisco.

Father Inzeo could not immediately be reached for comment. Parish officials did not respond to messages, the archdiocese did not know his whereabouts, and his lawyer, Roland Riopelle, said that neither he nor Father Inzeo had any comment. No criminal charges have been filed against Father Inzeo, and were unlikely because the episode alleged to have occurred fell outside the statute of limitations.

After the report was received, Mr. Zwilling said, the archdiocese contacted the district attorneys of Orange and Westchester Counties, according to its policy. The prosecutors' offices asked the archdiocese not to say anything to the priest while they looked into the case, Mr. Zwilling said. "We cooperated with that," Mr. Zwilling said. "They understood, of course, our desire to move quickly." On Friday, Father Inzeo was suspended.

An archdiocesan review board will now take up Father Inzeo's case and make a recommendation to Cardinal Egan about the validity of the charge and whether he should be reinstated or permanently cast out of the priesthood, with the possibility of appeal to a church court.

At least 13 priests accused of abuse have been waiting for more than a year for a decision from Cardinal Egan on whether they can return to ministry.

A review of all priests' files conducted last year found no blot on Father Inzeo's record, Mr. Zwilling said. The pastors at the other churches he served will be asked to address parishioners and give them the opportunity to come forward if they have any other allegations of impropriety by the priest.

Jeanine F. Pirro, the Westchester County district attorney, made a similar appeal. Ms. Pirro said her office interviewed the priest but had no jurisdiction over the case because the acts alleged took place outside Westchester.

Father Inzeo, 54, was well-liked at St. Anthony's, those familiar with the parish said.

The last suspension of a New York priest came at the end of last summer, Mr. Zwilling said. The priest, who has not been identified, was cleared and restored to ministry.

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