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## Abuse Scandal Reaches Region: 4 Priests in Region Fall to Zero Tolerance

By Suzanne Moore  
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PLATTSBURGH — A former Tupper Lake priest is among four toppled by the bishops' new zero-tolerance policy on sexual abuse.

Monday, the Diocese of Ogdensburg confirmed the names of the priests, including Robert M. Shurtleff, who served as pastor of Holy Name Church in Tupper Lake for about a decade before leaving two years ago; and David E. Wisniewski, who was assistant pastor for about two years at Notre Dame Church in Malone during the mid 1980s.

Also removed abruptly from their parishes last week were Clark S. White, pastor of St. Patrick's Church in Brasher Falls; and Theodore M. Gillette, of St. Paul's Church in Black River.

"These were very good men," said the Rev. John Yonkovic of St. Peter's Church in Plattsburgh and now, temporarily, of St. Alexander's in Morrisonville and St. Joseph's Church in Treadwell's Mills.

"They have been through therapy; they have repented — these are not child molesters."

But they did commit some form of sexual abuse and, under the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People passed by American bishops at the Dallas conference in June, therefore must lose their standing as priests.

"It has to be a substantiated allegation," said Sister Jennifer Votraw, speaking for the diocese.

Sunday, priests throughout the 119-parish diocese read a letter to their congregations from the Most Rev. Gerald Barbarito, bishop of Ogdensburg, informing them that he had taken steps "to implement the charter."

That would mean some immediate transfers of priests and consolidation of parishes to compensate for the reduction in personnel, the letter said.

The bishop did not identify the men, nor did he explain to the parishioners whose pastors were removed why those priests left.

Barbarito "wants to be sensitive to the victims and their families, the priests and their families and the parishes," Votraw said.

"He really does not want to add any hurt."

The bishop is on vacation this week and could not be reached for comment.

In Tupper Lake, the news came as a double blow to Catholics of Holy Name Parish, where Shurtleff ministered for so long.

With almost no notice, Holy Name's pastor, the Rev. Christopher C. Carrara, was tapped to fill the vacancy left by Shurtleff on the other side of the diocese.

So now that parish and St. Alphonse's, about 2.5 miles away, are sharing the Rev. Donald Kramberg.

"We knew, because of the shortage of priests, the crunch was coming," Kramberg said.

The priest said Holy Name's parishioners are saddened by Carrara's departure and shocked over Shurtleff's removal.

"(But) most I've chatted with seem to understand the need to zero the playing field," he said, "... even if something happened 50 years ago."

He believes the incident involving Shurtleff happened elsewhere, long before he came to Tupper Lake.

Parishioner Thomas Amell, who had nothing but praise for Shurtleff, said the church community is still reeling over the closure of Holy Ghost Academy, which he attributes, in part, to a lack of religious commitment by young adults.

"You start taking priests like Father Bob (Shurtleff) away, it's going to continue to worsen," he said.

Monday, the Rev. Stephen Gratto was settling in at Brasher Falls, where he replaces fallen priest Clark White.

"I think many people did not realize how strict the policy of the charter is," he said. "There's a sense of sadness and of loss here; (the people) were very attached over the years to Clark, for the most part."

Yonkovig fills Gratto's shoes, temporarily, in Morrisonville and Treadwells Mills.

He knows all four men and laments their loss.

"Cardinal George of Chicago said the document is deeply flawed, but nonetheless we have to approve it — I think he knew there were going to be men like this."

Suzanne Pietropaoli of Malone knew Wisniewski when he was at Notre Dame, "where he served well," she said.

She sees the sex-abuse scandal overall as a wakeup call "to and for the whole people of God to return to the serious discipleship to renew our own commitment to God ... to live more fully the faith that we profess."

Votraw believed the four removals represent all the cases of active ministry that fall under the dictates of the new charter.

Another priest, Liam O'Doherty, has not served for a few years because of litigation over sexual abuse that he's accused of committing. He last was pastor at St. Michael's Parish in Antwerp.

Yonkovig, who draws great distinction between confirmed serial pedophiles among the priesthood and the four men removed here last week, has called for the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston.

"I think part of the great error is the fact that the bishops (particularly Law) were poor personnel managers. They should have dealt with these individual cases in appropriate ways, and they didn't."

Zero tolerance, Yonkovig said, is an attempt by church leadership to restore confidence shaken by the scandal of secrecy and long inaction.

"I do hope, with the bishops, that this will assure everyone that this will never happen again.

"But I don't know if this really needed to happen," he added, much distressed. "I don't know."

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