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Diocese Has Ousted Eight Priests

Acting Head Acknowledges Figure, Apologizes to Victims, Their Families

By Chris Garifo
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OGDENSBURG -- The Roman Catholic Diocese of Ogdensburg has removed from ministry eight priests since the nation's bishops in June 2002 approved a zero-tolerance stance on child sexual abuse by clerics.

Acknowledgement for the first time that this many priests have been removed was included in a letter Sunday from Monsignor Robert L. Lawler, diocesan administrator, to all of the diocese's parishes. Monsignor Lawler has been the administrator since early September after the Bishop Gerald M. Barbarito left the diocese to become bishop of the Palm Beach, Fla., diocese.

In the letter, Monsignor Lawler apologized to the victims of sexual abuse by the clergy, and to the victims' families.

"Again, I cannot express enough my sorrow that even one child was subjected to sexual abuse by a member of the clergy," he wrote. "It simply should never happen, and is a grave violation of the sacred trust placed in us by the Lord and by the faithful."

Since 1950, 56 people, 37 of whom were minors at the time, have made sexual-abuse allegations against 35 clergymen. The diocese determined that the allegations against 23 of the priests - or 2.9 percent of the priests who have served in the diocese in the past 53 years - were credible.

In addition to the eight priests removed from ministry, five priests had previously retired, three died, four had left the ministry in prior years and three had transferred to other dioceses, but are no longer in ministry.

Since 1950, the north country diocese has paid more than \$1.6 million to deal with sexual abuse allegations against priests, including \$209,000 spent on settlement payments to victims.

Another \$1.49 million was paid for items such as victim counseling and treatment programs for clergy.

The money came from insurance, a special-care fund and priests' bequests to the diocese. None of the money has come from gifts to the annual Bishop's Fund or any other specified collections, Monsignor Lawler said.

One of the settlements was reached a year ago and involved lawsuits from four women who claimed Liam O'Doherty sexually abused them in the 1980s and '90s while he was a priest assigned to St. Andrew's Catholic Church in Sackets Harbor and the now-closed St. Michael's Catholic Church in Antwerp. In their lawsuits, the women sought \$17 million from the diocese. They settled for \$180,000.

Mr. O'Doherty had been removed from ministry before 2002 and no longer functions as a priest.

The diocese conducted a review of its records as part of the requirements of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which the nation's bishops approved overwhelmingly in 2002 as a result of the pedophile-priests scandal that rocked the church to its core.

Citing privacy issues, the diocese refused to identify any of the accused priests. The diocese has maintained that stance despite the charter including an article that requires each diocese to "develop a communications policy that reflects a commitment to transparency and openness."

Shortly after the charter's approval, Bishop Barbarito removed from ministry four priests who years earlier had been accused of sexual abuse of minors. The priests were:

David E. Wisniewski, pastor of St. Peter's Church in Lowville, St. Thomas Church in Greig, St. Mary's Church in Glenfield and St. Hedwig's Church in Houseville.

Robert M. Shurtleff, pastor of St. Mary's Church in Clayton and St. John the Evangelist Church in LaFargeville.

Clark S. White, pastor of St. Patrick's Church in Brasher Falls and St. Lawrence's Church in North Lawrence.

Theodore M. Gillette, pastor of St. Paul's Church in Black River and St. Rita's Church in Deferiet.

In July, the Watertown Daily Times reported that a fifth priest - the Rev. Paul F. Worczak, former pastor of St. Andrew's Church, Norwood - was removed after a victim came forward with allegations of sexual abuse that took place 30 years earlier.

The diocese refused to confirm or deny the circumstances of those priests' removals.

The diocesan statistics have been given to researchers at the John Jay School of Criminal Justice in New York City, which is to release a combined report using data from all of the nation's dioceses. That report is expected to be released in February.

The charter also established the Office of Youth and Child Protection, which is to release a report today on how well each diocese has complied with the charter.

Kathleen L. McChesney, the former FBI official who is executive director of the youth and child protection office, refused to say how well the Diocese of Ogdensburg has done in complying with the charter.

Diocesan officials said they believe all of the predatory priests have been removed from ministry.

"One never knows what you're going to find out, but as far as we know, we seem to have finished our business," said Sister Jennifer L. Votraw, diocesan director of communications.

No investigations into sexual abuse of a minor by a member of the clergy are now under way.

"Most of the reports came from allegations in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, so to the best of our knowledge, God willing, there are no allegations of teens now being abused," Sister Jennifer said.

The diocese also has instituted the "Protecting God's Children" program, in which all priests and any church employee or volunteer who works with children must participate. The program includes criminal background checks for all current and future employees or volunteers who work with children.

"We can't stop predators from being predators, but we can stop them from getting to our children," Sister Jennifer said.