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Two Women Sue Priest, Alleging Sex Abuse Alleged Incidents Occurred in Ogdensburg Diocese When They Were Children

By Mike McAndrew
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Two Syracuse area women are alleging in lawsuits that a Catholic priest sexually abused them as children in a church rectory years after unrelated criminal sexual abuse charges against the priest were dismissed.

A Franklin County grand jury accused the Rev. Liam O'Doherty in February 1979 of having sexual contact with three 14-year-old girls while he was the parish priest at St. Ann's Church in St. Regis Falls. The misdemeanor sexual abuse charges were dismissed six months later.

Two Syracuse area women sued O'Doherty within the past two years, alleging he sexually abused them between 1985 and 1991 in the St. Andrew's Church rectory in Sacketts Harbor. The Post-Standard discovered the O'Doherty case while researching local civil lawsuits involving priests after a sexual abuse scandal involving priests in Boston made national news.

Diocese of Ogdensburg officials knew O'Doherty had a "propensity to be sexually attracted to children" but allowed him to serve as a parish priest with access to children, the women alleged in separate lawsuits.

In addition to O'Doherty, the women sued the diocese and St. Andrew's Church, asking for a total of \$7 million in damages in state Supreme Court. The lawsuits are still pending.

O'Doherty, 63, served at St. Andrew's from 1979 to 1993, according to the Rev. Donald Comstock, who replaced him. Today, O'Doherty is an ordained priest with no public ministry, according to a diocese attorney.

Because the women allege they are victims of sexual abuse, the Onondaga County Clerk's Office blotted out the names of the women before releasing copies of the suits to The Post-Standard.

In addition to those women, two other women, who are sisters, told The Post-Standard that O'Doherty sexually abused them as children in the mid-1960s while he was a priest at St. Mary's Church in Canton.

"He's still a priest? Boy!" said one of the sisters, Teresa Monroe of Amsterdam, who contacted The Post-Standard after hearing that O'Doherty had been sued.

Monroe said O'Doherty frequently molested her in her parents' home when she was about 6 years old and that he also exposed himself to her.

Her older sister, who requested her name not be published, alleged in an interview that O'Doherty molested her on multiple occasions in her parents' home when she was 8 or 9 years old.

The sisters said they do not plan to sue O'Doherty or the diocese.

Ogdensburg Diocese Chancellor Terry LaValley declined Wednesday to comment on allegations against O'Doherty.

"Obviously, we're deeply troubled by the nature of the alleged conduct," LaValley said. "We're concerned about all the individuals allegedly involved. The church has never condoned the type of conduct referred to in the charges."

Diocese attorney Mark Schulte said that after O'Doherty was arrested in 1979, the diocese had O'Doherty evaluated, and the priest participated in counseling before he was cleared for parish work.

After that, the diocese was not notified of any complaints against O'Doherty until the lawsuits were filed, Schulte said. The diocese responded to the lawsuits by removing O'Doherty from public ministry, Schulte said.

O'Doherty did not respond to a request for an interview left Wednesday at Vianney Renewal Center in Dittmer, Mo., where he resides.

Vianney Renewal Center is a retreat for priests who may not be able to engage in active ministry due to personal, health-related, psychological, social or canonical reasons. Some priests or brothers who live there are registered sex offenders, according to the Vianney Web site.

O'Doherty's attorney, Peter Carmen, declined to comment.

In a civil suit filed in March 2000, a 21-year-old Syracuse woman alleged that O'Doherty sexually abused her and other girls when she was 10 years old during an overnight visit in 1991 at St. Andrew's Rectory.

She accused O'Doherty of forcing her to disrobe and join several other girls in a bath while the priest watched. O'Doherty washed and molested the other girls in the bath in her presence, the woman alleged.

O'Doherty also told her he was a medical doctor, stripped her of her nightgown, and directed her to sit nude on his lap and to lie nude on his bed. She became frightened and blacked out, she alleged.

In a civil suit filed in January 2001, a Syracuse woman in her mid-20s alleged O'Doherty fondled her breast on multiple occasions between 1985 and 1991, when she was 8 to 13 years old.

She alleged that in 1989 she sought shelter at St. Andrew's Rectory because a guest who was staying at her home became very drunk. O'Doherty insisted she sleep with him in his bed with her pants off, the woman alleged.

The two Syracuse women alleged the Diocese of Ogdensburg and St. Andrew's Church trustees knew of O'Doherty's propensity to be sexually attracted to children, but did not warn parishioners or restrict his access to children.

Attorney Joyanne Amisano, who represents both women, said they did not want to be interviewed. Amisano also declined to comment.

When O'Doherty was arrested in 1979, Ogdensburg Diocese Bishop Stanislaus Brzana was quoted in newspaper articles as saying, "I intend to stand by him." The bishop said O'Doherty would not be relieved of his duties at St. Ann's Church in St. Regis Falls.

Brzana, the bishop of the Ogdensburg diocese from 1968 to 1992, died in 1997.

Bishop Paul Loverde, who served as the Ogdensburg diocese bishop from 1994 to 1999, when he was transferred to the diocese of Arlington, Va., declined to comment.

The current Ogdensburg diocese bishop, Gerald Barbarito, issued a letter to parishes March 12 in which he apologized to any victims of clergy sexual abuse. He also sought to reassure worshippers

that abusive priests are in the minority.

Comstock said he read the bishop's letter to his parishioners Sunday, and mentioned that O'Doherty had been sued.

He said he also quoted Bishop Wilton Gregory, the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, who pointed out in a letter about the Boston sexual abuse scandal that there are more than 40,000 priests in our country who get up every morning and give their lives in full service to the church.

"The people were supportive of what I said," Comstock said.

Rev. Liam O'Doherty's career

1966-67: St. Mary's Church, Canton

1968: St. Joseph's Church, Malone

1969-1971: St. Patrick's Church, Port Henry

1972-73: St. Mary's Church, Clayton

1974-1979: St. Ann's Church, St. Regis Falls

October 1979-June 1993: St. Andrew's Church, Sacketts Harbor

June 1993-September 1998: St. Michael's Church, Antwerp

1999-2000: Absent on sick leave from Ogdensburg Diocese

Source: The Official Catholic Directory and interviews

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