

BishopAccountability.org

Clark Forces 3 Priests to Quit

By Jay Tokasz
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Three Catholic priests continued working in Rochester-area churches for more than two decades despite credible allegations that they had sexually abused teenagers.

Prodded by grieving victims and facing complaints of a cover-up, Bishop Matthew H. Clark, leader of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, on Thursday asked for, and received, their resignations.

The three priests were placed on administrative leave. Two other priests - disciplined in the 1990s amid allegations of sexual misconduct but still working in administrative jobs - were removed from those posts.

And a sixth priest, who is retired, was told he will not be able to continue in any form of ministry.

Clark announced the resignations in response to a Democrat and Chronicle request for specific information about several of the priests.

Clark said "the swirl of publicity" around sexual abuse led victims to contact the diocese and ultimately forced the bishop, over the past two months, to review personnel files.

Since January, a scandal has engulfed the Roman Catholic church, particularly in the United States, where at least 177 priests of about 47,000 nationwide have resigned or been dismissed from ministry amid allegations.

Victims and victims' advocates said the actions of the Rochester diocese are too little, too late.

"The diocese and the church have known of these problems for many years, and taking action now strikes me as nothing more than an exercise in damage control," said a Saratoga County woman whose son recently complained to the diocese about one of the priests, the Rev. Foster Rogers.

Until Thursday, Rogers was the pastor of St. Pius X Church in Chili.

The woman said her son was molested in 1975 when he was a 16-year-old parishioner at Church of the Assumption in Fairport.

"Were it not for public scrutiny, I think this would not have happened," said a Monroe County man who complained to the diocese about Rogers in 1993, years after he was allegedly abused. "Why did Matthew Clark decide to go back into the files 10 years later?"

John Aretakis, an Albany lawyer who has worked on several clergy abuse cases, said the actions of church leaders were "spin" intended to make the diocese look as if it were moving quickly to remove problem priests.

"They're just acting so late, and I think it's meaningless," said Aretakis, who represents Paul Hearty in a lawsuit against the Rev. William Lum.

Lum was convicted in 1992 of molesting Hearty, who then sued the priest and the diocese. A state

appellate court dismissed the suit against the diocese, but Lum may still face a civil trial.

Lum was removed Thursday from his post as a judge on the diocesan tribunal, a department of diocesan headquarters that reviews marriages, annulments and remarriages.

Clark said all of the abuse allegations against the three priests stemmed from the mid-1970s and involved teenagers, some male, some female.

He would not provide specifics about the abuse, other than to call it molestation.

None of the cases could be criminally prosecuted because they fall outside the statute of limitations.

The priests had acknowledged their misconduct and were treated and returned to ministry. Clark said he was not aware of any credible allegations against them since the 1970s.

"I have their word that there aren't any other instances to be concerned about."

Why did the diocese dismiss the priests now? Clark said it was in the best interests of the victims and in ensuring the safety of the community.

The bishop offered his "deepest apology to anyone who has been harmed by these priests or any other."

The abuses occurred while Bishop Joseph Hogan was head of the diocese. Clark did not review priests' personnel files when he became bishop in 1979.

"It never occurred to me to explore personnel files of this diocese. I wanted to look at everybody with fresh eyes," he said.

Besides, he added, "It would have been offensive in my mind to review the work of my predecessor without cause."

In 1993, on the heels of a sexual abuse scandal in Louisiana, the Rochester diocese adopted what was viewed by many Roman Catholics nationwide as a tough, progressive policy on handling sexual abuse allegations.

Nevertheless, no review of parish priests was conducted.

"I didn't think of it. Perhaps I should have, but I didn't," Clark said.

Societal understanding of sexual abuse and its impact on children has expanded since the 1970s, he said.

At that time, the diocese relied on contemporary research and the wisdom of the psychiatric community in determining whether priests who sexually abused children could continue in ministry.

Sexual abuse then was considered a "moral lapse" from which which priests could move on after being disciplined and doing penance, said the Rev. Joseph Hart, vicar general for the diocese.

People didn't understand the grievous impact of these acts on children, said Clark. "There's an awareness today of the horror that this causes in a child's spirit that was not there back then. It's an incredibly deep and lasting trauma for people."

The six priests - Rogers, Lum, the Rev. Thomas Burr, the Rev. David Simon, the Rev. Thomas Corbett and the Rev. Robert O'Neill - cannot participate in any ministry, wear clerical clothing or reside in parish or diocesan housing.

They will be able to receive a diocesan pension and health coverage through the diocese.

Also on Thursday, Clark said he would report to legal authorities any allegations of sexual misconduct brought to the attention of the diocese - a change in policy.

Clark had resisted doing so because he worried that some victims would not come forward with such a policy in place.

But he said other victims have described reporting as "very important to the health of our community."

"I recognize that times are changing and the church, as always, needs to respond and reform," he said.

For help

Anyone who has further concerns or who would like to report any incident of sexual misconduct may call Barbara Pedeville at (585) 328-3228, ext. 215, or the Rev. Robert Ring at (315) 536-7459. The toll-free number for the diocesan Pastoral Center is (800) 388-7177.

Accused priests

Nine priests accused of sexual misconduct in the past have been under investigation or review in recent weeks by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester. Here is the status of their cases:

? Three active priests have resigned at Bishop Matthew H. Clark's request:

- the Rev. Foster Rogers, 62, pastor of St. Pius X Church in Chili.
- the Rev. David Simon, 61, pastor of St. Paul Church in Webster.
- the Rev. Thomas Burr, 67, pastor of St. Mary Our Mother Church in Horseheads, Chemung County.

? One retired priest will be unable to continue in any form of ministry. The Rev. Robert O'Neill, 65, former pastor of St. Christopher Church in North Chili, will not be allowed to say Mass, administer sacraments or even wear clerical clothing or reside in any parish or diocesan dwelling.

? Two priests, already on administrative leave, face further restrictions. The Rev. William Lum, 58, and the Rev. Thomas Corbett, 62, may not continue their nonministerial assignments at the Diocesan Pastoral Center, wear clerical clothing or reside in any parish or diocesan dwelling.

? Three priests are under investigation by an advisory panel of diocesan staff members and lay professionals. Since March, the panel has been looking into allegations against two of the priests; allegations against a third were made just this week. The identities of those priests have not been disclosed.

PHOTO CAPTIONS

The Rev. Paul Shanley faces three counts of child rape. Shanley is accused of raping a young boy in the 1980s when he was a priest in Boston, 4A

Simon

Priest resignations

Diocesan boundaries

1 The Rev. Foster Rogers, pastor of St. Pius X Church, Chili.

2 The Rev. David Simon, pastor of St. Paul Church, Webster.

3 The Rev. Thomas Burr, pastor of St. Mary Our Mother Church, Horseheads.

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