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Retiree, 90, Is Latest Named in Reports of Sexual Misconduct

By Jay Tokasz
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They have lived with the secret for more than 30 years, and it is starting to leak out in public.

The more it does, the better, says a group of local men who claim they were molested decades ago by their parish pastor.

Officials from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester are struggling to determine the extent of the reported misconduct by the Rev. Francis H. Vogt. This week, a diocesan spokesman acknowledged that the diocese had received two credible complaints of sexual abuse against Vogt - one lodged in 1993, the other this year.

Vogt has been retired for two decades. He is now 90 years old and lives in the St. Joseph's Convent Infirmary in Pittsford, reportedly frail and unable to recall some events.

For the group of men, he remains unforgettable.

"This man took my life away," said Bernard Benitez, 42, of Rochester, who recounted Vogt's alleged molestation to the diocese in May.

Benitez said the priest repeatedly molested pre-teen boys for years when he was assigned to St. Bridget Church, a city parish made up largely of immigrant families in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Four other men also spoke with the Democrat and Chronicle on the condition that their names not be used.

"This happened 30-some years ago, and it just doesn't go away," said one of the men, who is 45 and lives in Rochester. "He took away my innocence."

The case illustrates not only the lifelong effects on victims of sexual abuse, but also the difficulty dioceses face as they try to restore their credibility in the wake of a sexual abuse scandal that continues to shake the Catholic Church.

Rochester diocesan officials believe the allegations they have received so far are credible, but they're having trouble investigating further because of Vogt's age and the length of time since the alleged abuse, said diocesan spokesman Michael Tedesco.

"He has really not been in a position to provide testimony. He has not been able to respond to the allegations," Tedesco said. "The investigation into this allegation is really one-sided because of his health and his age."

When confronted this summer with details of the allegations, Vogt told diocesan officials he could not remember, and he neither confirmed nor denied the alleged abuse, Tedesco said.

Benitez said he was disappointed by the diocese's response to his complaint.

"They didn't call me back," he said. "I had to continually call them. I feel like I was victimized again. I'm still upset about it."

The diocese did offer to pay counseling costs, which Benitez termed "a slap in the face."

A 40-year-old Rochester man said he had no intention of going to the diocese with his account. Others said they wanted the diocese to do more to seek out victims.

Tedesco said the diocese was doing the best it can. Victims of sexual abuse by a priest or any diocesan employee have an open invitation to contact the diocese for counseling, he said.

"Our first priority is to provide healing to victims, listen to them and repair the harm and hurt that's been done to them," he said. "We want to hear from people. We don't want anyone to continue to live in pain because of someone who abused their trust and authority."

Benitez and others say they believe more than 100 boys had encounters with Vogt.

Ordained in 1938, Vogt served as assistant pastor at St. Anthony in Elmira, from 1938 to 1942; assistant pastor at Holy Family in Rochester, in 1942; chaplain in the U.S. Army, from 1942 to 1946; assistant pastor at St. Francis of Assisi in Rochester, from 1946 to 1950; and assistant pastor at St. Salome in Irondequoit from 1950 to 1953. In 1953, he joined St. Bridget as assistant pastor and in 1961 became its pastor. He left in 1977 to become pastor at St. Anne in Palmyra, Wayne County, where he served until his retirement in 1982.

Benitez has talked to a local lawyer about his case, and he is asking other men who were allegedly abused by Vogt to call him at (585) 720-3071.

Meanwhile, the Rochester diocese continues to have two people responding to complaints of sexual abuse. Anyone who has further concerns or who would like to report any incident of sexual misconduct may call Barbara Pedeville at the diocese, (585) 328-3228, ext. 215, or the Rev. Robert Ring at (315) 536-7459.

The number for the diocesan Pastoral Center is (800) 388-7177.