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Sex Abuse Shadows Church

Catholic Leaders Make Gains, but Toll Mounts, Report Shows

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During the past two years, no "credible allegations" of sexual abuse have been filed against priests or deacons in the Syracuse Diocese of the Catholic Church.

In the Rochester Diocese, though, two allegations were lodged in 2006 -- one against a deceased priest dating back to 1954. Four allegations had been reported in 2005.

The local data was compiled for an annual report by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

The national conference of bishops commissioned the CARA survey several years ago to track allegations and costs related to priestly sexual abuse following widely reported incidents of misbehavior by priests that were initially uncovered in the Boston area.

NEW ALLEGATIONS CITED

The national statistics for 2006 showed 635 new and "credible allegations" of sexual abuse were lodged against 394 priests or deacons from Jan. 1 to Dec. 31, according to data filed by 193 of the 195 dioceses in the United States. Two dioceses refused to participate in the voluntary survey.

That compares to 695 new allegations in 2005 and 898 in 2004. About 60 percent of the priests or deacons named in 2006 had already been accused in previous cases. About 55 percent of the allegations were reported by the victim, according to CARA; 80 percent of the victims are males.

A caution when reading the statistics: Because an accusation was filed in 2006 does not necessarily mean the alleged sexual abuse occurred last year: It means the allegation was reported to church authorities in 2006.

In fact, the CARA report said a majority of the allegations reported in 2006 were related to alleged incidents from decades ago; about 70 percent reportedly occurred between 1960 and 1984. About 70 percent of the accused offenders were deceased, had already been removed from ministry or left the priesthood.

Catholic churches in Broome and Chenango counties are included in the Syracuse area. Tioga County churches are part of the Rochester Diocese.

Though the Syracuse area has been devoid of any credible allegations in 2006 and 2005, sexual abuse by priests has still taken a toll on the priesthood and drained thousands of dollars from the diocese's treasury, according to Danielle Cummings, assistant chancellor and director of communications.

21 PRIESTS REMOVED

Since sexual abuse by Catholic clergy began making widespread headlines in the early 2000s, Cummings said the diocese has removed 21 priests from ministry; many due to incidents dating back 15 to 30 years.

Nine lawsuits are outstanding, Cummings added. One clergyman from the Syracuse area was removed or retired in 2005 based on sexual abuse allegations, according to CARA.

In 2006, the Syracuse Diocese spent almost \$52,000 for therapy for victims and almost \$42,000 for attorneys' fees. The diocese also spent almost \$147,000 for victims' assistance, background checks, as well as prevention and protection programs.

About 16,000 people have been trained in the diocese's Safe Environment Program for priests, employees and volunteers who work with youths under 18.

The costs for 2006 in Rochester are not available because the diocese did not undergo an on-site audit, according to spokesman Doug Mandelaro.

Both dioceses have victim-assistance coordinators who handle complaints of suspected abuse involving a minor and clergy, a church employee or volunteer.

FALLEN FROM GRACE

One of the allegations in 2006 in the Rochester area involved John Steger, a former pastor at St. Jude the Apostle in Gates, west of Rochester. Police filed misdemeanor charges against the longtime priest after a 12-year-old girl said she was inappropriately touched in the church rectory last spring. Steger's case is pending in the courts, Mandelaro said.

In 2005, the Rochester allegations included misdemeanor charges against Dennis R. Sear, a former pastor at the Church of the Annunciation in northeast Rochester who was accused of fondling a 14-year-old boy.

Sear pleaded guilty to a non-sexual charge and avoided registration as a sex offender. Also that year, federal charges were filed against Michael Volino, former pastor of St. John the Evangelist in Greece, a Rochester suburb. Volino admitted to possessing child pornography and must register as a sex offender.

CASES SHOW TIER IMPACT

Some sexual abuse cases involving former priests who once served parishes in the Southern Tier before the national CARA survey include:

- David P. Simon, a former pastor at an Apalachin church, resigned in May 2003 at the request of Bishop Matthew H. Clark of Rochester. Simon admitted to sexually abusing a teenager in the mid-1970s before he was assigned to St. Margaret-Mary from 1983 to 1999.
- Albert H. Cason, a former co-pastor at St. Patrick Church, was removed from ministry in 1985 by the Diocese for sexual misconduct with children at the Owego parish.
- Eugene Emo, an associate pastor at St. Margaret-Mary and St. Patrick in the 1960s and 1970s, pleaded guilty in 1997 to molesting a 30-year-old disabled man not connected to the Tioga County churches.
- John S. Lugowski, a former associate pastor at St. Joseph Church, pleaded guilty in 1987 and resigned from the priesthood in 1989 after serving eight months in jail for felony sodomy and sexual abuse of a 10-year-old Binghamton boy, which occurred after Lugowski left the Endicott church in 1983.

COSTS ARE STAGGERING

The national aggregate costs related to sexual abuse allegations fell in 2006 from 2005, but the dollar amount is still staggering, according to the CARA report.

Almost \$398.6 million was paid out by dioceses as settlements, therapy, support and attorneys' fees in 2006, including \$220.1 million for settlements to victims.

That compares to a \$466.9 million total in 2005. Across the country, dioceses spent \$25.6 million in 2006 for prevention and protection programs.

"The sad truth is that this entire process is essentially a PR sham based on self-reported 'statistics' given by bishops themselves, the very same men who got us into this mess," The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests said in a statement on their Web site.

PARISHIONERS AFFECTED

And the continuing evidence of new sexual abuse allegations against priests is taking a toll on Catholic parishioners' confidence in their leadership.

According to a March survey by LeMoyne College in Syracuse on Contemporary Catholic Trends -- done in cooperation with Zogby International based in Utica, 31 percent of 1,522 respondents across the country said they are aware of an accused priest in their diocese, and these Catholics report less support for bishops -- 61 percent -- than the 74 percent approval rating among those who are unaware of an accusation.

Matthew Loveland, principal investigator, said "the emotional toll is great for all Catholics, but more difficult for those who can put a face on it."

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