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'Several New Calls' Accuse Priest

By Jay Tokasz
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A retired Rochester priest who took boys on weekend retreats to his cottage in Jefferson County in the 1970s is being accused of sexually abusing minors during that time.

Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester officials have received "several new calls" about the Rev. Robert O'Neill, stripped of his priestly faculties last week for sexual misconduct.

O'Neill, 65, resigned as pastor of St. Christopher Church in Chili in June 2001 because of health problems and was working in the administrative headquarters of the diocese until his retirement on May 1.

O'Neill also worked at diocesan headquarters in the 1970s, and he lived for several years at St. Boniface Church on Gregory Street. Parishioners there remember O'Neill as a sociable priest who was around children often.

On weekends, he would take several boys, usually ages 11 to 15, to a cottage along the Chaumont River, near Watertown.

At least two boys who visited the riverside cottage claim O'Neill molested them. The boys - now men in their 30s - are being represented by Jeffrey Anderson, the Minnesota lawyer who has named the Vatican as a defendant in sexual abuse lawsuits in Florida and Oregon.

Initially, parents viewed the retreats as a generous gesture by a friendly priest. But some children began complaining about the trips and some parents refused to allow their kids to keep going, three parishioners told the Democrat and Chronicle.

David Haight's two sons, now in their 30s, were among dozens of boys who stayed at the summer house in the mid-1970s. Haight asked his sons and other children about what happened on the trips, but "they all clammed up."

Later, some boys said O'Neill supplied them with alcohol. They also said they determined who would have to sleep in O'Neill's bedroom by cutting cards among themselves, according to Haight and another parishioner, Tom Enright.

Enright also had a son who stayed overnight at the Chaumont cottage. Haight and Enright said they wrote a letter between 1977 and 1981 complaining about O'Neill to the Most Rev. Dennis Hickey.

Hickey, then the diocese's auxiliary bishop, is now dead.

"I'm disappointed in myself," said Enright, "that we didn't go to the district attorney after we got off the phone with the bishop."

The diocese did investigate a complaint against O'Neill in the 1970s, said Michael Tedesco, diocesan spokesman.

"He was accused of inappropriate behavior with a minor, but the alleged misconduct did not constitute

sexual abuse," said Tedesco.

O'Neill was then sent away for treatment. Tedesco said he did not know what kind of treatment O'Neill received.

The new complaints followed an announcement last week prohibiting O'Neill and five other priests from performing the sacraments, wearing the clerical collar and living in diocesan housing.

O'Neill, who is staying with friends, declined comment on Tuesday.

But Mary Lynch, a parishioner at Church of the Annunciation, called O'Neill a dedicated priest who is under a tremendous amount of stress over the church's sexual abuse scandal.

"He has a heart condition, and we're very concerned about his health," said Lynch. "If people made mistakes 25 years ago and they're not making mistakes now, I think they've made amends. . . . He's really a good guy, that's all I can tell you. He's a very good person."

Robert F. O'Neill

Ordained: June 2, 1962, Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Assignments:

1962: Assistant pastor, Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church, Brockport.

1967: Assistant pastor, Holy Cross Church, Rochester.

1973: Diocesan Tribunal.

1987: Pastor, Church of the Annunciation, Rochester.

1998: Administrator, St. Christopher Church, Chili.

1999: Pastor, St. Christopher.

2001 - Diocesan Tribunal.