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A Victim Says Clark Relocated an Abuser

By Jay Tokasz
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A man who claims he was molested as a teenager by a local priest told Rochester Bishop Matthew H. Clark about the alleged abuse in the early 1980s, according to an amended lawsuit.

Clark reportedly told the man he would "take care of it," the lawsuit charges.

Rather than keeping the Rev. Robert O'Neill away from children, Clark assigned the priest to serve as pastor at two other parishes.

The Monroe County man, who has asked to remain anonymous, revealed the meeting as part of an amended lawsuit filed in Monroe County Court on Thursday.

Clark declined comment on his handling of O'Neill, citing the lawsuit. O'Neill could not be reached for comment.

Diocesan spokesman Michael Tedesco said the diocese follows a strict policy in handling complaints of sexual abuse.

O'Neill had his faculties as a priest removed, Tedesco said, "as soon as we determined allegations were credible."

O'Neill was told in May he could no longer perform the duties of the priesthood or live in diocesan housing.

He is one of eight priests in the Rochester diocese since April who were suspended or removed from active ministry because of credible complaints of child sexual abuse; most of the alleged abuse occurred decades ago.

Three men who alleged they were abused by O'Neill in the 1970s originally filed the suit against O'Neill and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester in June.

On Thursday, five more men joined the lawsuit, including the 36-year-old businessman who says he met with Clark shortly after he was allegedly fondled in the fall of 1980 or 1981.

The man, listed as John Doe 58 in the suit, said he doesn't remember specifically what Clark said in the meeting. The bishop indicated he would deal with the matter, and John Doe 58 and his parents "were satisfied" with the response at the time, the plaintiff said.

O'Neill, however, continued living and working at St. John the Evangelist in Greece for several months after the alleged abuse. In 1987, he was assigned as pastor of Church of the Annunciation in Rochester, and in 1999 he became pastor of St. Christopher Church in Chili.

Citing health concerns, he resigned as pastor there in 2001 and retired in 2002.

This year, more than 300 of the nation's 47,000 priests have been removed from ministry due to sexual abuse allegations. Several bishops have been criticized for their handling of abusive priests,

some of whom were shuffled from parish to parish while their victims were given confidential settlements to hide the abuse allegations.

The Rochester diocese had received parishioner complaints about O'Neill for years.

In 1972, a small group of parishioners from Holy Cross Church in Charlotte approached the diocese with concerns about O'Neill, who was an assistant pastor at the time.

The concern was mostly with O'Neill's drinking, although people also had questions about his involvement with young people, said Carol Gilbert, a former Holy Cross parishioner.

"The molesting issue never came up," said Gilbert. "At that time you didn't talk about it, if you know what I mean."

O'Neill was removed from Holy Cross in 1973 and appointed to the office of the diocesan tribunal, which makes decisions regarding marriages, annulments and remarriages. He lived at St. Boniface Church on Gregory Street and sometimes celebrated Mass there as a priest in residence.

St. Boniface parishioners David Haight and Tom Enright said they wrote a letter in the late 1970s to the Most Rev. Dennis Hickey, then auxiliary bishop, regarding inappropriate activity at O'Neill's cottage along the Chaumont River, near Watertown.

Haight and Enright - who have sons who visited the cottage in the 1970s - said they did not have a copy of the letter. Hickey is now deceased.

The diocese has acknowledged investigating a complaint in the 1970s against O'Neill for inappropriate behavior with a minor and then sending him away for treatment. But Clark said in May that he didn't review priest personnel files when he took over as bishop in 1979 or when he instituted a new policy in 1993 to handle sexual abuse complaints.

O'Neill moved to St. John the Evangelist Church in Greece as a priest in residence around 1980, while he was still assigned to diocesan headquarters.

John Doe 58, a teenage parishioner at St. John at the time, said he was molested during a trip to the Chaumont cottage.

A few months later, he and at least two others who claim to have been molested by O'Neill and another priest explained to Clark what had happened to them, the plaintiff said.

"We told the bishop all this stuff in great detail," said one of the other men who was at the meeting with Clark. "For him to say that he didn't know about this (the abuse) is unbelievable to me. I don't know what incentive he had not to do anything about it."

The man, who now lives in Connecticut, was shocked to see O'Neill in the early 1990s presiding at a friend's wedding.

"My stomach dropped and I said, 'I can't believe this guy is still a priest,' " he said.

Mark Furnish, one of the five new plaintiffs, wishes he had known about O'Neill before he agreed to visit the priest's cottage in 1983.

The visit led to at least four instances of sexual abuse - mostly sexually charged massages and touching of the genitals, said Furnish, who was 12 years old at the time.

"A lot of times you would wake up and he would be touching you," he said. "I didn't want to admit any of that stuff happened. Part of the victim mentality is, 'Did this really happen, or am I being supersensitive?' "

O'Neill also provided alcohol to minors and took them into pornography stores on trips to Toronto, said Furnish, a former altar boy at St. John the Evangelist Church. Furnish, 31, is now a lawyer in Albany.

O'Neill went on to become pastor of Church of the Annunciation in Rochester in 1987 and pastor of St. Christopher Church in North Chili in 1999.

Despite the alleged abuse, O'Neill stayed in contact with Furnish for several years.

Furnish said he had a panic attack in 2000 during a trip with his wife to the Thousand Islands, not far from O'Neill's Chaumont cottage, he said.

Furnish didn't realize the effect of the alleged abuse until news accounts of abusive priests became common this year, the lawyer said.

"That's when the dam broke," he said.

Furnish said he isn't seeking money, just an opportunity to reclaim some control over a damaged part of his life.

"There's really nothing to say to him. I think he's a very sick individual," said Furnish. "I'd just like him to admit he did this, that he made these mistakes and there are consequences for his mistakes."

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