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Diocese Evaluates Future of 2 Priests

By Jay Tokasz
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The Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester is reconsidering whether it should keep two priests accused of sexual misconduct employed in the diocese's main office.

The priests had been reassigned from parishes in the 1990s amid the allegations. Those decisions are now being reviewed by a panel of diocesan staff and outside professionals.

Bishops across the country have received intense criticism for their handling of abusive priests. In an effort to restore trust, many dioceses - including Rochester's - are re-examining how they discipline priests and under what circumstances priests accused of misconduct should be allowed to stay in the ministry.

The Rev. William Lum and the Rev. Thomas Corbett both work in the diocese's legal services office as part of the diocesan tribunal, which makes decisions regarding marriages, annulments and remarriages.

Lum was removed as pastor of Our Lady of Mercy Church in Greece in 1996. In 1997, he pleaded guilty to molesting a 16-year-old boy who was a former parishioner.

Corbett was charged with two counts of third-degree sexual abuse in 1991 while he was associate pastor at St. Theodore Church in Gates. The charges, which did not allege abuse of a minor, were later dismissed.

Lum is now listed as a judge with the diocesan tribunal; Corbett is listed as a notary and judicial assistant. Both are full-time positions.

"In some few instances, after counseling, the diocese has provided some priests with desk jobs, while at the same time suspending them from all priestly ministry," said the Rev. Joseph Hart, diocesan vicar general.

Earlier this month, an Elmira priest was suspended and subsequently resigned as a hospital chaplain after allegations surfaced that he sexually abused a teenage girl in the 1970s in Ohio. That priest, the Rev. Joseph Brodnick, was suspended by the Diocese of Cleveland even though a panel of lay professionals determined that he was not a danger to work as a chaplain.

Hospital and diocesan officials in Cleveland and Rochester knew of the alleged abuse at the time Brodnick was appointed in 1996. Brodnick had no complaints lodged against him during his time in the Rochester diocese.

Diocesan officials have said that the climate of scandal was forcing them to consider different standards in determining who is fit for ministry. They also said it is possible for other priests to be removed from ministry for isolated acts of misconduct, even from two or three decades ago.

The Rochester diocese now acknowledges removing at least five priests since 1985 from active ministry because of complaints of sexual misconduct. Three no longer work for the diocese; they are Eugene Emo, Robert Winterkorn and Albert H. Cason.

None of the priests has been defrocked, but they are not allowed to wear clerical clothing or perform functions that would identify them as active priests.

Emo, former pastor at St. Januarius Church in Naples, Ontario County, served six months in jail in 1997 after pleading guilty to molesting a 30-year-old disabled man. In 1999, he was charged with violating probation by having contact with a 16-year-old boy.

Emo was sentenced to one to three years in prison. He was released from Midstate Correctional Facility in August.

Winterkorn was removed as pastor of St. John the Evangelist Church in Spencerport in 1993 after admitting to a long-term sexual relationship with a female parishioner that began when she was a minor. Criminal charges were not filed and he now works part-time for the town of Irondequoit.

Cason was co-pastor of St. Patrick Church in Owego, Tioga County, when he was removed from ministry in 1985. Hart said a complaint of sexual misconduct against Cason was "investigated and found credible."

Cason received treatment but "at no time subsequently was he allowed to return to ministry," said Hart. No criminal charges were filed against Cason. He now lives in Seneca County and works at a lumberyard, according to his stepmother.

Why do some accused priests leave the employment of the diocese, while others remain?

Victims of sexual abuse aren't sure which is better. They want to see abusive priests punished. However, if such priests resign, "that's a problem because they end up somewhere else abusing kids," said the Rev. Gary Hayes, acting president of Linkup, a national group of survivors of clergy abuse.

Hayes, a Catholic priest in Kentucky, says he was sexually abused as a child by two priests.

Hayes questioned whether a priest accused of abuse should be on a diocesan tribunal.

"It's kind of questionable whether that would be a good idea. It's the wrong kind of job."

Hart would not discuss individual cases, but he said the desk jobs involved paperwork, such as transcribing interviews and reading depositions. He said dioceses must follow the Catholic Church's canon law, while considering the needs of the larger community.

"The difficulty is two-fold," said Hart. "First is that it is not easy in our law to remove a priest. Secondly, out of our obligation to the Christian community we have not wanted to simply release into the general population someone who is better cared for by us, under tighter control with us. But that's always a judgment call and all judgments are fallible."

Lum, who studied canon law after he was placed on administrative leave, could not be reached for comment. In a phone interview, Corbett said the criminal charges were dismissed. When asked whether he would prefer an assignment at a parish, he responded: "We take a vow of obedience and serve according to the Lord's call."