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## A Protector or a Predator?

By Carol Eisenberg  
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He is a priest and a civil attorney who boasted of his national renown as an expert on priest sexual abuse.

But Msgr. Alan Placa, former vice chancellor of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, emerges from the pages of the Suffolk grand jury report as a master of deception: He held himself out as a protector of children even though he too had been repeatedly accused of making sexual advances to adolescent boys. The report cites sworn testimony of three men who accused Placa of numerous sexual advances while they were adolescents 25 years ago.

Later, as the diocese's chief contact with victims, Placa pursued "aggressive legal strategies" to defeat and discourage litigation or publicity about priest sex abuse. Those strategies included gathering information that might be used if necessary to impeach a victim's credibility -- even in cases involving allegations of priest rape and sodomy that he and others knew were credible, the report said.

While the report does not identify Placa by name, it provides sufficient details about his career to make him identifiable as "Priest F" -- a parish priest who became a teacher at a boy's high school and later a civil attorney who went on to write the diocese's policy on sexual abuse.

"This is a person who was directly involved in the so-called policy of the church to protect children when in fact he was one of the abusers," Suffolk District Attorney Thomas Spota said Monday, declining to identify the official except as "Priest F." "That speaks volumes for what this diocese's real intention was. Although their stated purpose was to protect children, that certainly was not their practice."

Placa, who did not testify before the grand jury, did not respond to calls at his residence at St. Aloysius in Great Neck or at the office of Giuliani Partners, where he has worked for former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, a childhood friend. A spokeswoman for Giuliani said the former mayor stood by the priest, whom he described as "one of the kindest, most caring and smartest people I know."

Placa resigned as vice chancellor last April, a week after being confronted with allegations of abuse by Newsday. In June, following the publication of a story detailing those allegations, the diocese suspended his faculties as a priest pending its own investigation. Diocesan officials said last week that that probe is ongoing.

The grand jury report cites the claims of four alleged victims -- three of whom testified -- dating to Placa's first parish assignment in St. Patrick's in Glen Cove and continuing after he became a teacher and a dean at the now-defunct St. Pius X Preparatory Seminary in Uniondale.

"Priest F was cautious, but relentless in his pursuit of victims" at the school, the report says. "He fondled boys over their clothes, usually in his office. Always, his actions were hidden by a poster, newspaper or a book ..."

One alleged victim testified how he was fondled behind a banner made for a march protesting the Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision, the report said.

"Once, Priest F approached one of the boys behind the school stage. He grabbed his crotch. The boy reacted violently, pushing Priest F away and warning him never to touch him again."

Another alleged victim, a former altar boy from Glen Cove, described what the report called "feeble attempts" at abuse, in which the priest put his hand on the boy's thigh "and crept up towards the boy's genital area" on two occasions.

The report's most stinging criticism is directed at Placa's work on the diocese's so-called "intervention team" that handled allegations of sexual abuse until the system was overhauled last spring by Bishop William Murphy.

Placa was often the first contact with victims and they rarely knew he was a civil attorney who represented the bishop and, as such, was gathering material that might be used to defend the diocese.

"Please do not identify me as an attorney [to complainants]," he wrote to top officials of the diocese in a confidential memo quoted in the report. "In fact, in these cases, I am functioning in an administrative capacity. ... My legal training is very useful in helping to gather and analyze facts, and in helping us to avoid some obvious pitfalls, but we must avoid 'frightening' people: I have had several people refuse to see me without having an attorney of their own present, because they are afraid that 'the church lawyer' will somehow do them harm."

The grand jury wrote that "the fears of these victims were justified."

Routinely, the report said, Placa dragged out cases to make legal redress difficult. Victims were often "ignored, belittled and revictimized. In some cases, the grand jury finds that the diocese procrastinated for the sole purpose of making sure that the civil and criminal statutes of limitation were no longer applicable."

In one case involving the Rev. Brian McKeon, Placa reportedly told a nun who had brought together victims and their families that the meeting was a waste of time because the statute of limitations had expired.

"Her response was heartfelt," the report said. "She said, 'You bastard. These people are hurting. Why do you care about the statute of limitations? That's not why we are here.'"

In that same case, a newspaper clipping recounting a drunken driving accident in which an intoxicated driver caused the death of the driver's sister was placed in McKeon's file. The driver was a witness to one of the acts of sexual abuse, according to the report.

"The grand jury finds," the report said, "that a fair interpretation of the reason for the dissemination of this article was so that the victim's arrest for driving while intoxicated, the accident and related death of his sister could be used against him should his allegations of priest misconduct ever become public."