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## Top Church Officials Off Sex Abuse Panel

By Steve Wick  
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Two top officials of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rockville Centre who were responsible for how the diocese handled sexual abuse complaints against priests are leaving their posts, one to take over a large parish and the other to begin a sabbatical.

At the same time, a diocese spokeswoman said Bishop William Murphy will dissolve the three-man intervention team that included these two officials and create a new group to handle allegations of sexual abuse against Long Island priests.

"He is considering who should be on the team and what qualifications people should bring to the team," said the spokeswoman, Joanne Navarro. The new group, she said, would likely include women, non-priests, psychologists, and other professionals equipped to work with both victims and law enforcement officials - something diocesan officials have never done with previous allegations.

Msgr. John Alesandro, 61, served since September as vicar general, the second most powerful position in the diocese behind Murphy. He'll leave that job to become pastor of St. Dominic's Church in Oyster Bay, replacing Msgr. Charles "Bud" Ribaud, who was stripped of his priestly duties last month because of allegations that he inappropriately touched a student 20 years ago.

Navarro said Alesandro will assume the parish post immediately and will work with his replacement as vicar general, Msgr. Robert Brennan, during a transition period. Currently, Brennan serves as the secretary to Murphy.

Msgr. Alan Placa, 57, vice chancellor and the bishop's legal counsel, asked for and received a sabbatical, a diocesan spokesman said. While diocesan officials say they don't know when the sabbatical will end, they said Placa will eventually take over a parish somewhere in the diocese.

While diocesan officials say the personnel changes are not related to how these men handled sexual abuse complaints in the past, they come just as district attorneys in both Nassau and Suffolk counties have begun to examine volumes of documents turned over by the diocese pertaining to sexual abuse allegations against priests.

Since January, the diocese - like many in the nation - has been repeatedly rocked by a burgeoning sex abuse scandal. And Navarro said the changes "certainly reflect the bishop's intense scrutiny of the process" of how sex abuse complaints were handled.

In Suffolk County, where District Attorney Thomas Spota has said he will impanel a special grand jury devoted solely to the issue, one avenue of the investigation is expected to be how diocesan officials handled abuse complaints.

In their respective roles, both Alesandro and Placa sat on a three-man "intervention team" that historically investigated all sex abuse complaints against priests. The third member of that team was Msgr. Francis Caldwell, the diocese's personnel director.

Placa, who in addition to being vice chancellor also served as secretary to Murphy for health affairs,

did not return phone calls yesterday asking for comment. Alesandro also could not be reached. In a statement faxed by the diocese, Placa praised Murphy for offering him the post of pastor of an as-yet undecided parish in the diocese.

"After our conversation, however, he agreed to grant me a sabbatical to pursue research and begin writing a new book," Placa wrote. "I look forward to this time of refreshment and renewal and to the opportunity for new and creative work."

A civil as well as a canon lawyer, Alesandro was named diocesan administrator after the death of Bishop James T. McHugh in December 2000. After Murphy was installed in September of last year, he named Alesandro vicar general.

"He [Alesandro] is a brilliant man," said a diocesan official who asked not to be named. "He is also a good man."

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