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Priests Face Judgment

8 LI clerics accused of abuse are defrocked, 3 face church trials, 2 cleared, according to letter to parishioners from bishop of Rockville Centre

By Rita Ciolli
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The Vatican has defrocked eight Long Island priests accused of sexually abusing minors, ordered three priests to face church trials and cleared two others, Bishop William Murphy discloses in a report on the abuse crisis to be published later this week.

Three years after the scandal broke in Boston and reverberated in dioceses across the nation, Catholics here will be given a tally on the status of clerics who have been accused.

In a three-page letter, Murphy said 23 priests had credible abuse allegations made against them. The accusations against nine of the priests were disposed of by the Diocese of Rockville Centre, while the cases against 14 others were sent to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for review.

"Of those 14, two were found to have the allegations sufficiently unsubstantiated so that I am able to return them to ministry. For three of the priests, the Diocese has been instructed to have a canonical process or trial," Murphy writes. Murphy also disclosed in his update that the Vatican dismissed eight of the clerics from the priesthood.

On Friday, diocese officials declined to name any of the priests referred to in the letter. However, the diocese has previously identified Michael Hands and Andrew Millar, two priests whose arrests and convictions in New York State courts were well publicized. They both agreed to be laicized, which means they have been formally removed from the priesthood.

Murphy's decision not to name six of the former priests drew criticism for placing children at risk because these men, although not convicted in civil or church courts of any wrongdoing, are not under any church supervision.

"While all efforts that are directed toward the protection of our children are greatly appreciated, how can the Catholic community feel safe when the names of these abusive priests are kept secret? Who are they and where are they now?" asked Dan Bartley, co-director of Long Island Voice of the Faithful, a lay group seeking more openness in the church.

David Clohessy, national director of SNAP, the Survivors Network for Those Abused by Priests, credited Murphy for taking a tough stance in getting accused priests to accept laicization, saying that Rockville Centre probably has a higher percentage of defrocked priests than most other dioceses based on the organization's monitoring of local dioceses.

However, Clohessy said Murphy, like other bishops, is too caught up in bureaucratic details and is ignoring the risk that these men could molest again. "They can tinker all day long around the edges doing policy and procedures and paperwork but if they don't name the dangerous priests publicly it is nearly meaningless," he said.

The update comes in a three-page annual report that will be published on the diocese's Web page and in the Long Island Catholic on Wednesday, although pastors were told to mention and possibly distribute the report at Masses this weekend, said Sean Dolan, a diocese spokesman. The report is

required under the "Diocesan Child Protection Policy," which outlines how the diocese will handle reports of child sexual abuse.

Overall, there are seven points addressed in the report. Murphy, who is visiting a mission the diocese supports in El Cercado, Dominican Republic, also noted that the diocese will continue to pay for independent audits of its child protection program even though it is no longer required to do so.

While the diocese declines to attach names to the numbers, some have already been disclosed. A Newsday story in May reported, and the diocese confirmed at that time, that the Rev. Michael Carroll was cleared of sexual misconduct by the Vatican earlier this year. Officials also found allegations "unsubstantiated" against the Rev. Brian Brinker, according to priests who said that Murphy announced Rome's finding against both men at a conference for priests in November. Carroll was given a limited assignment last spring to celebrate Mass at Villa St. Joseph, a convent on the grounds of Mercy Medical Center in Rockville Centre. Brinker, who resides at the St. Pius X Residence in Uniondale, is frustrated that Murphy has yet to give him a new assignment, according to colleagues. Neither Carroll nor Brinker returned calls seeking comment.

Of the three priests facing a rarely invoked church trial for violating canon law, the bishop only said diocesan lawyers are preparing prosecutions before an "ecclesiastical tribunal." A diocese spokesman declined to comment on when or where those trials will take place.

Cases against nine of those priests were never sent to Rome essentially because they plea bargained with the diocese, agreeing to a permanent suspension in return for keeping some retirement and medical benefits. " ... They agreed they will never again exercise any public ministry, may not say public Mass or present themselves as a priest," Murphy wrote. One of those priests under permanent suspension is Msgr. Charles Ribaudo, the former pastor of St. Dominic's parish in Oyster Bay, who has said publicly that because of his heart condition, he was not well enough to contest the charges against him.

In addition, the case against one priest has been suspended because he is ill, living outside the diocese and has not worked as priest for a long time. "We agreed to leave his status alone ...," Murphy said, noting that the priest remains under permanent suspension and is barred from any ministry.

However, Tom Myles, a Voice of the Faithful board member, said that Murphy fails to note that he occasionally gives permission to these suspended priests to celebrate Mass publicly. Myles said, "He is contradicting his own statement."

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