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A 2nd LI Priest Removed

Action based on 1997 complaint

By Steve Wick
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Two weeks after Bishop William Murphy said there were no "credible" allegations of sexual abuse against any active priest on Long Island, the diocese has removed the Rev. Angelo Ditta from active duty based on a complaint it has been aware of since 1997.

The action, taken last week, is the second against a priest on Long Island since Murphy's statement to the Diocese of Rockville Centre. It is based on allegations made by a victim and his therapist to a top diocesan official five years ago - allegations the Suffolk district attorney now says might have been prosecutable had the diocese reported them at that point.

[Photo caption - The Rev. Angelo Ditta.]

"The district attorney's office should have been notified in 1997," Suffolk District Attorney Thomas Spota said yesterday. "The case might have been prosecutable then. This diocese seems to think they will decide what is a crime and who is a criminal, and that is just not their function."

In May 1997, Matthew Mosher, then 23 years old, and his therapist met with Msgr. Alan Placa, the diocesan vice chancellor, and told him Mosher had been repeatedly molested by Ditta, beginning when he was 9, in the priest's bedroom at a parish rectory in Selden.

Mosher said that after he and his therapist detailed the abuse, the diocese began paying his and his mother's therapist bills, but did not notify Suffolk County law enforcement officials of the allegation or tell Mosher how they would handle it.

But diocesan records show that Ditta was then sent away for six months of therapy, before being allowed to return and continue working as a priest.

Until his removal last week, Ditta was a chaplain at Nassau University Medical Center in East Meadow; he also conducted Mass on Sundays at Our Lady of Good Counsel in Mattituck. Ditta did not return messages left at his residence, St. Pius X in Uniondale.

Ditta also is listed as an adjunct professor at Dowling College in Oakdale, where he is teaching two classes this semester.

Last week, the diocese also removed the Rev. Eugene Vollmer, an associate pastor at St. James in Seaford, because of allegations made by two brothers, Rainer and Mark Welzel. Since then, several other people have come forward to police with accusations concerning Vollmer, sources said.

On Monday, Joanne Novarro, a spokeswoman for the diocese, confirmed that Ditta had been removed, but said she would not talk about the allegations. Asked to explain Murphy's statement on March 13 that there were no credible allegations against active priests, Novarro re-read that statement and refused to comment further.

Last week, the diocese turned over records of sexual abuse allegations to the Nassau and Suffolk district attorney's offices. Law enforcement and diocesan officials say 14 names of priests, including Ditta's, were given to Suffolk authorities.

"That means they had information in their files on Ditta, which directly contradicts the bishop's statement that there was nothing," said one diocesan official, who asked not to be named.

Laura Ahearn, an advocate for sexual abuse victims and founder of the group, Parents for Megan's Law, said she was "deeply disturbed" about how the Ditta case was handled.

"Bishop Murphy made a commitment to our community when he said there was no one serving in our diocese with a substantial allegation against him," she said. "Now two cases have surfaced. They place more value on protecting their priests than they do our children."

Yesterday, Mosher, 28, seated in the Garden City office of his attorney, Melonie Little, said he met Ditta in 1984, when he was 9 and serving as an altar boy at Our Lady of Grace in West Babylon.

He said that Ditta befriended his parents, and that when Ditta moved to St. Margaret of Scotland in Selden he would frequently visit him and serve Mass with him there.

During the course of the next three or four years, Mosher said, he met Ditta more than 20 times in his rectory bedroom. Diocese records show that Ditta was in Selden from 1986 to 1989; then he went to St. Louis de Montfort in Sound Beach, St. Luke's in Brentwood and St. Joseph in Ronkonkoma.

He was at St. Joseph when the allegation was made to Placa, who confirmed yesterday that he met with Mosher in 1997.

During his visits to Ditta's room, Mosher said, the priest would ask him to massage his feet, would masturbate in front of him, fondle him and get in bed naked with him. "Several times he said if anyone asked any questions, to say I never slept over," Mosher said. "He wanted me to say we were just friends. I remember him telling people who saw us together that I was his younger brother."

He said the abuse stopped when he was 14. "It just stopped," Mosher said. "I think I got too old for him."

In 1995, when he was 21, Mosher said his life was a mess. "I was scared," he said. "I didn't know what to do. I was going crazy, drinking a lot. I couldn't hold a job, or keep a relationship. I was going nuts. I thought many times of killing myself, but I didn't want to do that to my family."

Finally, he said, he decided to tell his father, a New York City emergency services officer. "We sat in our den," Mosher said. "It was the hardest thing to do, to tell my dad. He said he would take care of it." Soon after, though, his father died, he said.

In April 1997, he began therapy, and the following month accompanied his therapist to the meeting with Placa.

Last week - on the day the allegations against Vollmer were reported in Newsday - Little said the diocese called the therapist and asked to meet again. Little said she told Mosher and the therapist not to. "They had a chance to do the right thing, but instead they let this priest continue to work," Little said.

For Mosher, speaking out is a form of therapy. "I have been unable to live a life that I wanted," he said. "But maybe now by talking about it, I can help someone else. I don't want anyone to suffer like I did."

[Staff Writer Carol Eisenberg contributed to this story.]