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Priest Ousted From L.I. Church Panel Defends Its Work

By David W. Chen
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One of the priests who was dismissed this week from the Long Island diocesan panel that investigated accusations of clerical sex abuse defends his performance but says the restructured panel might give victims and critics more confidence in the integrity of the process.

In a telephone interview on Wednesday night, Msgr. Alan J. Placa said he felt the team of three clergymen, which was established in 1992, had acted fairly and sensitively in handling accusations of sexual abuse by Roman Catholic priests in the Diocese of Rockville Centre. Since he is also a lawyer, he added, some people may have had the false impression that he put the interests of the diocese ahead of those of the possible victims.

"As attorneys, we would not be obligated to report allegations, but as priests we would," Monsignor Placa said. As a result, he said, he completely supported Bishop William Murphy's decision this week to remove the panel members and create a more diverse panel that would include lay people.

The other members of the panel were Msgr. John A. Alesandro and Msgr. Frank Caldwell. Joanne Novaro, a spokeswoman for the diocese, said the reconstituted panel would be announced in a couple of weeks and probably would include at least one woman.

More than the other two, Monsignor Placa has become something of a lightning rod as Long Island Catholics come forward to accuse priests, prosecutors consider seeking indictments, and critics say the church was too protective of its priests.

Several families, for instance, have accused him of trying to extract information from victims in his capacity as a spiritual adviser, then using that information to help the diocesan legal strategy.

"He wore the collar when it was appropriate, and he took it off when it wasn't," said Cary Scott Goldinger, a lawyer in Garden City who has represented several clients who accuse priests of abuse. Monsignor Placa has denied doing that.

In recent months, some families have also focused on Monsignor Placa's connection to the House of Affirmation in Whitinsville, Mass., a now-defunct treatment center for troubled priests that became the target of at least two lawsuits charging sexual abuse, and numerous other lawsuits charging financial improprieties in the 1980's.

In one of the abuse cases, Mark Barry of Uxbridge, Mass., said he had been molested repeatedly as a child in the 1970's by several priests engaged in a child sex ring, chiefly the Rev. Thomas A. Kane, the executive director of the House of Affirmation. Court papers in the lawsuit against Father Kane; the bishop of Worcester, Mass.; and the House of Affirmation show that the first person Father Kane contacted when learning about Mr. Barry's accusations was not a local lawyer, but Monsignor Placa.

In an interview, Monsignor Placa said he did serve as a legal consultant on the case, which was filed in 1993. He said one of the people who was on the House of Affirmation's board of directors was another Long Island priest and longtime friend, Msgr. Brendan Riordan.

Father Kane described Monsignor Riordan, a seminary classmate, as "one of my closest friends" in a deposition for another sexual abuse case.

Monsignor Riordan later moved to Massachusetts to serve as the center's director of education between 1984 and 1986.

In 1995, Mr. Barry settled his case for \$42,500. As part of the agreement, neither Father Kane, the House of Affirmation, nor any of the priests affiliated with the institution admitted any wrongdoing.

"This was a bad case, involving a bad man who was a liar who lied under oath," Monsignor Placa said of Mr. Barry. "I swear to you."

Mr. Barry's lawyer, Roderick MacLeish, said in response, "Mark struck me as a very credible guy."

Monsignor Riordan referred a caller seeking comment yesterday to Michael D. Hess, who was the New York City corporation counsel under Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani.

Mr. Hess is also handling all legal matters for Monsignor Placa, who is a childhood friend of Mr. Giuliani's.

Monsignor Riordan is in active ministry, serving currently as pastor of St. Aloysius Church in Great Neck.

Monsignor Placa, who is 57, is to assume the pastorate of a church still to be named, the diocese said.

"I have a real tough job, and I know I have some enemies," he said. "But this is gossip, innuendo and lies, coming from people who I believe have a reason to be angry with me."

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