

BishopAccountability.org

Accused Monsignor Has Whitinsville Ties

By Richard Nangle
Worcester (MA) Telegram & Gazette
February 17, 2003

A Long Island grand jury's inquiry into priest abuse took on a Central Massachusetts flavor when it linked a high-ranking church official who bragged about negotiating low cash settlements there to do legal work for the scandal-plagued House of Affirmation in Whitinsville.

In a report released last week, the Suffolk County Supreme Court Special Grand Jury noted that Monsignor Alan J. Placa, who is a civil lawyer as well, "was also counsel to at least one clergy-related treatment center, The House of Affirmation in Massachusetts. This fact was not well known to other high-ranking priests in the diocese."

The findings make a strong case for convening a similar grand jury in Worcester County, according to Daniel J. Shea, a Houston-based lawyer who represents several local people who allege clergy abuse.

"We never knew Placa was the counsel to the House of Affirmation," Mr. Shea said of the former clergy treatment center.

The grand jury, which heard testimony from 97 witnesses, reported that Monsignor Placa strove to settle potentially multimillion-dollar sex-abuse cases inside a range of \$20,000 to \$100,000.

"That tells me that the sum in the Mark Barry settlement agreement of \$42,500 is in Placa's range, which in truth would be worth millions of dollars," Mr. Shea said.

The grand jury report said the Rockville Centre Diocese protected numerous priests accused of sexual abuse by reassigning them.

Suffolk County District Attorney Thomas Spota said the grand jury could have indicted 23 priests for sexual abuse and charged the church hierarchy with a cover-up had the proper laws been in place. The grand jury made a list of recommendations to New York lawmakers that included the abolition of statute-of-limitation laws in child sex abuse cases.

The diocese has been critical of the report. Abuse victims have applauded it.

Last week, Mr. Conte said the Worcester Diocese several months ago turned over the names of priests accused of sexual abuse dating back to 1944. He said he issued a grand jury subpoena prior to receiving the list. Mr. Conte has resisted pressure to release both the number of priests and their names. He has said he will release the number after concluding his investigations.

A grand jury is hearing testimony on the priest sex-abuse scandal in Boston, but in more than a year since the scandal re-emerged locally, Mr. Conte has made no indication that he would set up a similar proceeding here.

In 1995, the Catholic Diocese of Worcester agreed to pay Mr. Barry to settle a lawsuit in which he claimed that beginning at age 9 in 1968 he was repeatedly sexually abused by House of Affirmation co-founder the Rev. Thomas A. Kane.

Rev. Kane left the House of Affirmation, a treatment center for priests with sex abuse and other

problems, in 1986 amid allegations of financial impropriety. The facility closed in 1989.

The Barry settlement agreement, obtained in February 2002 by the Telegram & Gazette, named three other priests but provided no context for the inclusion of their names. The three were: the Rev. Thomas Teczar, the Rev. Robert Shauris and Monsignor Brendan Riordan.

Those names had never been linked to the Barry case in the past. Disclosure of the settlement clause prompted Mr. Shea to say, "I can only conclude that there was a ring of priests who passed Mr. Barry around." The diocese has denied that any such priest sex ring existed and Bishop Daniel P. Reilly has said he signed the agreement "in good faith as prepared and approved by the legal counsels representing all the parties and agreed upon by Mr. Barry at the time."

Monsignors Riordan and Placa have longstanding ties to each other and to the House of Affirmation. The former was once a director at the House of Affirmation and was a friend of Rev. Kane. Before Rev. Kane filed for bankruptcy in the early 1990s, he transferred property he owned in Florida to both men.

In a 1999 deposition, Rev. Kane said he was teaching English in Mexico. The diocese continued paying Rev. Kane a stipend until last year, when the Telegram & Gazette first reported his whereabouts in Mexico.

Mr. Barry has called for Worcester District Attorney John J. Conte to prosecute Monsignor Riordan. Mr. Conte has said he does not have a case against the monsignor.

The New York Times has quoted Monsignor Placa saying Mr. Barry lied under oath about alleged abuse by Monsignor Riordan.

Regarding his work for the Rockville Centre Diocese, the grand jury quoted from a letter written by Monsignor Placa that read in part, "I am able to give some of my time to helping other bishops and religious congregations with delicate legal problems involving the misconduct of priests. ... In the past 10 years, I have been involved in more than two hundred such cases in various parts of the country."

The report also accuses Monsignor Placa of making sexual advances toward several boys. Three men who gave grand jury testimony accused Monsignor Placa of making sexual advances toward them while they were adolescents 25 years ago.

Monsignor Placa would go on to become the diocese's liaison to victims. According to the report, he pursued "aggressive legal strategies" designed to avoid both litigation and publicity about priest sex abuse.

Those strategies included gathering information that could be used to call a victim's credibility into question. According to the report, Monsignor Placa used that strategy even in cases where he knew charges of priest rape were credible.

The report identifies Monsignor Placa as "Priest F" and provides details about his career that make him identifiable, including his work as a high school teacher and as a civil lawyer who wrote the Rockville Centre Diocese's sexual-abuse policy.

Monsignor Placa did not testify before the grand jury. He lives at St. Aloysius in Great Neck, where Monsignor Riordan is pastor. He works at the office of Giuliani Partners, for childhood friend and former New York City Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani. Attempts to reach Monsignor Placa at his home by telephone for comment were unsuccessful.

Last April, he resigned as vice chancellor of the diocese after being confronted with allegations of abuse. When news stories detailed the abuse allegations, the diocese suspended Monsignor Placa pending its own investigation.

Alleged abuse victims who dealt with Monsignor Placa often were unaware that he was a lawyer representing the bishop and was gathering evidence 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.”

According to the grand jury, “the fears of these victims were justified.”

The grand jury described Monsignor Placa's role as leaving many victims “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.”

The diocese covers 1.3 million Catholics in Nassau and Suffolk counties on Long Island.

Mr. Shea said he was particularly interested in the timing of the real estate transaction between Rev. Kane, Monsignor Riordan and Monsignor Placa.

He said he hopes to be taking Monsignor Placa's deposition sometime in the coming weeks.

[Richard Nangle can be reached by e-mail at rnangle@telegram.com.]

Any original material on these pages is copyright © BishopAccountability.org 2004. Reproduce freely with attribution.