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Priest: Former LI Bishop Ignored Reports of Abuse Priest's Statement Links Diocesan Leader to Church Cover-up

By Eden Laikin
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By the time the Rev. Edward Seagriff got to tell his story to then-Bishop John McGann in fall 1986, he felt desperate.

He had already told three church officials -- his pastor, the vice chancellor of the Diocese of Rockville Centre and a diocesan lawyer -- that the Rev. Matthew Fitzgerald, a priest in his Westbury parish, was fondling young boys. But the only result was that Fitzgerald was eventually transferred to St. Matthews in Dix Hills, where he was placed in charge of that parish's youth ministry.

Additionally, Seagriff said, all three officials specifically told him not to contact police.

When he spoke with the bishop, Seagriff said he was surprised because McGann seemed more angry at him than at Fitzgerald. "What do you expect me to do with these men?" McGann snapped at him in a conversation Seagriff described as "heated."

"Throw them out," Seagriff said he answered.

"Well," he said McGann replied, "that's why I am the bishop and you are not."

After the visit, Seagriff said he knew of no further action against Fitzgerald. However, Seagriff said that within two months, the diocese eliminated Seagriff's salary and health insurance while he was on leave, a leave he says was directly related to the stress of his effort to report abuse. Seagriff said he didn't challenge the loss of benefits because he didn't think he could prove it was related to his complaints.

While last month's report by a special grand jury in Suffolk County blamed McGann's deputies for a cover-up of sexual abuse by priests within the diocese, Seagriff's statement -- made Friday in response to a subpoena by Manhattan attorney Michael Dowd -- directly ties McGann to the scandal for the first time.

Dowd initially subpoenaed Seagriff in connection with a lawsuit he's filed on behalf of 42 abuse victims against the Diocese of Brooklyn, where Seagriff was a seminarian. He said Monday he also questioned Seagriff about Rockville Centre because Dowd plans to sue the diocese on behalf of about 20 people who have contacted his office.

McGann, who died in 2002, led the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rockville Centre from 1976 to 2000. Diocesan spokeswoman Joanne Novarro Monday declined to comment on Seagriff's statement saying, "This is something that's under litigation ... "

The statement by Seagriff -- a priest at Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Lindenhurst since 1993 -- describes how he tried to get the diocese to deal with two different priests, one in Westbury, the other in Holbrook. In one instance, he said he pulled Fitzgerald off two teenage boys he had wrestled to the ground and was fondling. In the other, he reported that the Rev. Brian McKeon had young boys up in his room in the Holbrook rectory drinking alcohol "at least once a week," and that the boys sometimes spent the night there.

In both instances, the statement said, the diocesan response left him "disillusioned." The incidents occurred in the 1980s, and both men continued to serve as priests until after the sex abuse scandal gained notoriety at the end of 2001, when their faculties to act as priests were removed.

Monday, Seagriff declined to comment on the statement he gave to Dowd, except to say he stood by it and is "grateful that Bishop Murphy has quickly put into place in the diocese a system to prevent a situation like this from happening again."

Seagriff, 50, said the first complaint he made about Fitzgerald came in 1982, when Seagriff was 27, and a newly ordained priest assigned to St. Brigid's church in Westbury. He said he received complaints from teens and their parents soon after Fitzgerald arrived at the parish.

The first complaint came from an anonymous woman who said Fitzgerald inappropriately touched her 15-year-old son in a health-club shower. Later, teenage brothers told him Fitzgerald had fondled one of them in the club's Jacuzzi, after telling them to take their bathing suits off before getting in.

Then, in April 1985, Seagriff said he came home to the rectory to find two teenage boys being "wrestled down to the ground" by Fitzgerald. "The kids are screaming 'get off of me, stop touching me,'" as Fitzgerald grinded into the boys "in a sexual manner," Seagriff said. "... he was grabbing, touching, groping, grinding."

Seagriff said he pulled Fitzgerald off the boys and chased him to his room. The boys then told him how, over a year's time, Fitzgerald would come up behind them in the sacristy and "thrust his hands into their underpants and grab them," Seagriff said. One told him that Fitzgerald also fondled him in the boy's backyard pool.

Each time he received a complaint against Fitzgerald, Seagriff said he told his pastor, Rev. Fred Schaefer, about it. But when he did, he said, Schaefer told him to stop bothering him. At one point, he said, Schaefer told him, "Mind your ... business," using an obscenity.

"I immediately said to the pastor, I think the police should be called," Seagriff recalled, but he said Schaefer said "a priest doesn't have to call the police, and he didn't want the police called." Schaefer died in 1996.

Finally, when an alleged victim told him he was suicidal because of the abuse, Seagriff said he spoke with Msgr. John Meszaros, who was then vice chancellor. But even though Meszaros told him he would take care of it, Fitzgerald remained at St. Brigid's and his sexual activity continued, Seagriff said.

After another incident in which Fitzgerald allegedly groped a boy in a gym, Seagriff said he told Meszaros "if you do not agree to meet these parents, they are going to the newspapers."

"It was only then," Seagriff said, "that Meszaros arranged ... for the victim's parents to meet with the bishop" and Fitzgerald was soon transferred.

Meszaros, who left the priesthood in 1986, said Monday that he had "no recollection of Seagriff calling," but that he does recall "Fitzgerald being called into priest personnel. I would not have known what happened after that," he said. "My responsibility was to send it up the chain of command."

Seagriff said that after he talked with Meszaros, Msgr. Alan Placa, acting as the bishop's representative, called him and told him he was "off the case." He also told Seagriff, "I should absolutely not go to police because a priest doesn't have to."

Monday, Placa, an attorney now working in Manhattan, said he would have no comment on Seagriff's statement "until I see the deposition." Fitzgerald, who lives in Florida, did not respond to phone messages left Monday. His ability to act as a priest was removed by the Diocese of Palm Beach last

year after it received three allegations of sexual misconduct.

Within months after his exchange with Placa, Seagriff got in to see the bishop and said he realized nothing was going to change. "Tired ... disillusioned," he continued on his leave for a year and a half, he said, before he was emotionally able to return to work.

When he did, he said he found out very quickly that the problem hadn't disappeared.

In December 1988, Seagriff was assigned to the Church of the Good Shepherd in Holbrook, where he served with McKeon. In his second night there, he said, McKeon's room was filled with teenage boys drinking beer. He told McKeon he was uncomfortable with the alcohol, and with McKeon being alone with the boys in his room.

But McKeon laughingly told him not to worry, he said.

The inappropriate behavior continued, Seagriff said, with boys spending the night in McKeon's room. He said he advised his pastor, the Rev. Tom Spadaro, each time it occurred. But he said Spadaro's response was to be upset with him.

Once, Seagriff said, Spadaro accused Seagriff of being jealous because McKeon was "popular here."

Monday, Spadaro said he recalled Seagriff telling him that McKeon was "drinking with kids," but didn't remember him saying that the boys ever spent the night with McKeon. Reached in Florida, McKeon declined to comment.

The end result of all of this, Seagriff said, was that he felt compelled to ask the diocese to transfer him away from the situation, and the bishop agreed.

"I tried to work within the church, but also within the walls of society," Seagriff said in his sworn statement. "The only reason that I believe that the church is at this point is that they said they'd take care of it. Unfortunately, they were individuals who lied to us all along."