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A National Precedent

Suffolk Seeks Grand Jury to Examine Church Abuse Cases

By Steve Wick and Carol Eisenberg
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In an unprecedented move, the Suffolk County district attorney's office plans to empanel a special grand jury to investigate sexual abuse allegations against priests in the Diocese of Rockville Centre and how the diocese handled those allegations.

The grand jury - apparently the first of its kind in the nation to explore this issue - would be empaneled for the sole purpose of hearing evidence related to the growing scandal on Long Island. The request to empanel the grand jury is awaiting final approval by state court officials, which is considered pro forma.

"This has never happened before, and it's long overdue," said Jeffrey Anderson, a Minneapolis lawyer who has represented victims of sexual abuse cases involving Catholic priests for 20 years. "I applaud this. We've been screaming from the hilltops for this to happen. This is a first, and I hope not the last."

Meanwhile, the sexual abuse scandal facing the diocese has cost a prominent pastor his job - the third priest to be stripped of his powers since March 13, when Bishop William Murphy said there were no "credible" allegations against active priests.

Msgr. Charles "Bud" Ribaudo, 63, the longtime and popular pastor of St. Dominic Roman Catholic Church in Oyster Bay, one of Long Island's wealthiest parishes, confirmed that he was stripped of his priestly powers March 27 after he submitted a letter of resignation March 12 because of allegations that he had inappropriately touched a student 20 years ago.

The complaints were made by the Rev. Michael Hands, who himself pleaded guilty last month to sodomy charges involving a teenage boy. Ribaudo said the complaints against him are false, but confirmed that Murphy had removed his priestly faculties, even after he announced he was retiring.

Ribaudo said yesterday that he was "flabbergasted" by the charges. "I categorically deny that there was any sexual relationship between us then, or in the 22 years I have known him since," he said. "This was never anything more than a friendship. I can only presume he is trying to take advantage of our relationship."

Ribaudo said he would have fought Hands' allegations, but chose not to because of a deteriorating heart condition.

Newsday reported last week that Hands is cooperating with the Suffolk district attorney's office in its investigation of the diocese. The DA's office has also subpoenaed diocesan records pertaining to all sexual abuse allegations going back 25 years.

Hands' testimony, along with the records, is expected to be presented to the special grand jury when it is empaneled later this month. It is not clear whether Hands' allegation against Ribaudo would be part of the grand jury probe.

Suffolk County District Attorney Thomas Spota did not return phone calls yesterday seeking comment about the grand jury. State court officials told Newsday they expected the panel to begin its work by

the end of April, and it could run for at least six months.

Under state law, prosecutors can set up special grand juries whose sole function is to hear a single case, rather than regular grand juries that are empaneled for a month and can hear many cases.

"This grand jury sits apart from the regular grand jury," said Barbara Barron, a criminal law professor at Hofstra University. She said special grand juries are rare, and are most often used for long-term investigations.

As the scandal over sexual abuse allegations and how they have been handled has mushroomed, many prosecutors around the country have sought church records. Nassau County District Attorney Denis Dillon has received diocesan records, and district attorneys in New York City and Westchester are reviewing records from the Archdiocese of New York submitted this week.

"I think this is a great step," said David Clohessy, the national director of Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests. "I do think it's sad that a prosecutor has to do this. I long to see the day when a bishop says I want to do the right thing and allows prosecutors to look into his records."

Ribaudo said he was stunned by what Hands is reported to have said about him because he has been a mentor and friend to Hands since the younger man confided in him that he wanted to become a priest.

Based on what he was told by diocesan officials, Ribaudo said, "I was accused of hugging him 20 years ago in a way that violated his boundaries by today's standards. And I don't deny doing that. But I'm caught up in a double standard. Twenty years ago, that wasn't in my head. I did not fondle him. I did not have any physical contact."

However, sources said yesterday that the charges made against Ribaudo were more serious than that. Hands told a diocesan official last August that Ribaudo had molested him for three years, the sources said, from the time Hands was a freshman at Holy Trinity High School in Hicksville until he was a junior. At the time, Ribaudo was chaplain counselor at the high school.

"Michael's statement is absurd and unfair," Ribaudo said. "It sounds to me as if he was trying to excuse his own behavior by claiming that I had somehow influenced him when he was a student."

Ribaudo said that while he was not happy with the bishop's decision, he would not criticize it.

"I have taken a vow of obedience," he said. "And in the context of what's going on in the church today, the bishop has to respond in an absolute way to anyone making any kind of allegation. I don't think he has any choice. He has to act to protect people's confidence."

Hands, who is awaiting sentencing, was not available for comment.

Ribaudo said he told St. Dominic parishioners several weeks ago that he was resigning after 15 years because of a deteriorating heart condition that already has resulted in five heart surgeries.

"The fact that I got caught up in the middle of this scandal that is going on within the church was so stressful to me and I was so embarrassed by it that my doctors suggested I resign," Ribaudo said. "And I was hoping that if I resigned, I could go off into the sunset quietly. I wasn't looking to be anybody's martyr."

Members of the North Shore parish described him as a powerful preacher who had built up the 100-year-old parish to include almost 3,500 families, including some of the wealthiest patrons of the Catholic Church on Long Island.

"This is a mess," said Wesley Wood, of Laurel Hollow, who is a trustee of St. Dominic's. "This is a good priest whom I have known for years. This is one of those instances where someone ... is getting

swept up in the events of the time."

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