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Diocese Hit in Sex Abuse 23 Seek \$100m in Suit vs. L.I. Clergy

By Mike Claffey
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Twenty-three men who say they were childhood victims of sexual abuse by Catholic priests on Long Island filed a \$100 million lawsuit yesterday against the Diocese of Rockville Centre and 15 alleged abusers.

The 64-page complaint recounts a litany of sexual abuse by priests dating to the 1950s - and echoes charges made by a Suffolk grand jury in February.

The grand jury's report accused the church hierarchy of covering up sexual misconduct and moving pedophile priests from parish to parish, where they could target new victims.

"We're here because the church put the sexual predator priests ahead of the children they were charged to protect," said Michael Dowd, the lawyer who filed the suit in Nassau Supreme Court. Dowd brought a similar case last year against the Brooklyn Diocese.

Joanne Novarro, a spokeswoman for the Rockville Centre Diocese, which has nearly 1.5 million members in Nassau and Suffolk counties, said: "The diocese intends to defend this case vigorously, as any other institution in our society has the right to do."

Novarro would not respond to specific claims in the suit.

Two of the 23 plaintiffs in the case appeared with Dowd yesterday. They said they have carried the scars of their abuse through life.

'Pushed me away'

John Salveson, 47, of Bryn Mawr, Pa., said he was abused for seven years from 1969 to 1976 by the Rev. Robert Huneke at St. Dominic's Parish in Oyster Bay, L.I. Three other men in the suit also claim they were abused by Huneke.

Brian Dionne, 51, of Brooklyn, said he was abused by the Rev. John Butler at St. Joseph's Parish in Kings Park, from ages 8 to 11, from 1959 to 1963.

Salveson, who heads an executive search firm, said he first came forward in 1980, complaining about his abuse to the late Bishop John McGann.

But instead of an apology, he said, "They have pushed me away, treated me like their sworn enemy."

"If [McGann] had sat me down and said, 'Oh my God! I can't believe this happened to you. What are we going to do? Let's get Father Huneke out of circulation. How can I help? How has this affected your life?' But instead they engaged with me what they do with everybody: Nine years of lies, deception, blowing smoke, manipulation," Salveson said.

Dionne, a counselor for the mentally retarded, said that after complaints about Butler from other parents, the priest was shifted to a parish in Brooklyn and recently retired from a parish in Metuchen, N.J.

"To my knowledge, he was never removed from service, he never received treatment," he said.

Dowd noted that he was educated from grammar school through law school in Catholic institutions. He insisted money was not the motivating factor for him or the plaintiffs.

"Damn it, I want to clean this up," he said. "I want it to stop. I want leadership that cares more about children than they do themselves. This is an embarrassment to me. It's like my family that has done this."

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