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Nun Alleges Sex Abuse at Convent

By Stuart Vincent
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A Long Island nun who said she was sexually abused by her mother superior just months after entering a Sea Cliff convent in 1968 has filed a \$ 3.75 million civil suit.

The lawsuit by Sister Jean Patricia Henninger, who is on a leave of absence from the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, says she was abused several times between September, 1968, and February, 1969, by Sister Gloria Czarniewicz, then mother superior of a convent for nuns who worked at St. Christopher Otilie children's services in Sea Cliff.

The suit charges that Czarniewicz would go into Henninger's room while she was asleep, lie on top of her and fondle her.

Henninger, who was 20 when she joined the order in 1968, said she never mentioned any abuse to anyone. "Back when that happened, who else could you turn to? I was just in. I couldn't tell the provincial [regional head of the order]. They would have thrown me out."

It wasn't until she met up with Czarniewicz years later while teaching in Riverhead and after receiving counseling from a diocesan service that she told her superiors she had been abused, she said. It was only when she was dissatisfied with her order's response that she took legal action, she said.

Czarniewicz was unavailable for comment. A nun at the Riverhead convent said she no longer lived there, was on vacation and would return to the order's provincial house in Monroe, Conn. Sister Janice Kobierowski, provincial for the order, declined to comment. Stephen Donahue, attorney for the order, could not be reached for comment.

Also named in the lawsuit are the Diocese of Rockville Centre, St. Christopher Otilie and the Diocese of Brooklyn, under whose auspices St. Christopher Otilie operates. Msgr. Alan Placa, a vice chancellor for Rockville Centre, said the case sounded familiar but he did not recall the details. He was unaware that a lawsuit had been filed. Calls to the Brooklyn diocese were not returned. Robert McMahon, executive director of St. Christopher Otilie, declined to comment.

Past and present provincials and assistant provincials of the religious order and a former director of St. Christopher Otilie also were named as defendants.

The statutes of limitations for both criminal and civil cases in New York expired about 20 years ago, but Henninger's attorney, Michael Montesano of Glen Cove, said he will argue that the clock on the statute should not have begun ticking until after Henninger took her leave of absence in 1989. While there have been many lawsuits charging sexual abuse by priests around the country, there are few such legal actions against nuns, according to members of victim support groups.

"I think it's more difficult for women to come forward with this [type of charge] about nuns than it is for women to come forward with this about priests ... talking about involvement with women brings into question their sexual identity ... " said Sheila Gray, an insurance agent in suburban Detroit who a year ago began Support for Women Abused By Nuns.

Jeanne Miller, president of LINKUP, a nationwide support group for victims of sexual abuse by clergy,

said that until about a year ago, she had not heard of many cases of sexual abuse by nuns. "These [cases] seem to be popping up about as rapidly now as priest sexual abuse allegations did in the late 1980s ... so the taboo is being lifted," she said.

Henninger's decision to take legal action came after she was transferred to Riverhead in 1987 to teach at Mercy High School and discovered that Czarniewicz was also a teacher there and living at the same convent. Henninger said she became depressed and considered suicide. She sought counseling, and it was to her counselor that she revealed for the first time what had happened. Henninger later reported the abuse to her provincial, whose only response, she said, was, "We all slip from time to time."

When the order refused to transfer either her or Czarniewicz or take any action against Czarniewicz, Henninger in June, 1989, asked for and was granted an extended leave of absence from the order. She has since taught in parochial schools on Long Island.

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