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Misconduct Concerns:

Diocesan official's role in complaints eyed

By Carol Eisenberg
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Pat McDonough believed a boy was about to kill himself because of the unrelenting attentions of a young priest when she met eight years ago with Msgr. Alan Placa, then one of the most powerful men in the Diocese of Rockville Centre.

The 14-year-old former altar boy told her during a religious retreat that the **Rev. Joseph Mundy** had confided how lonely he was, how difficult celibacy was, and how the two of them needed each other. McDonough, then a religious educator, told Placa she believed Mundy was grooming the boy for sex and asked Placa what he would do about it.

"My job is to protect the bishop," she recalled Placa as saying.

Well then, she wanted to know, whose job is it to protect the boy? Placa looked away from her and lit a cigarette.

"That's when I knew nothing would be done," said McDonough, a psychologist and a columnist for the diocesan newspaper, The Long Island Catholic.

Starting in the mid-1980s, when cases of priest sexual abuse came to national attention, Alan Placa played a central role in how such complaints were handled on Long Island. A nationally recognized legal expert on sexual abuse, Placa, 57, was a chief architect of the diocesan policy and one of its chief executors until he stepped down as vice chancellor in mid-April.

Now, even as a Suffolk grand jury probes possible obstruction of justice by top church officials, questions are being raised about Placa's performance in that job, as well as about his conduct 25 years ago when he taught high school boys aspiring to the priesthood.

Investigators are examining complaints that Placa and other top officials placed troubled priests back into jobs where they had contact with children, sometimes against the advice of psychiatrists - a charge Placa denies. Victims, meanwhile, say that he was evasive and lacked compassion in dealing with their complaints, and that his dual role as priest-confidant and legal counsel to the bishop was not made clear to them, putting them at a disadvantage.

"Alan Placa was the point person on sexual issues [for the diocese], and he handled these cases as quietly as possible, to the detriment of the victim, to the detriment of the priest, as well as to the detriment of the church in the long run," said Robert Fulton, a former director of priest health services in Rockville Centre who has since left the priesthood. "You can't possibly represent the interests of the priest, the victim and the diocese at the same time, as he did."

Placa dismisses such criticisms, saying balancing victims' concerns against the rights of priests was a difficult, inherently contentious job. "I have one set of critics saying I've been involved in a cover-up and have not reported things, and that is absolutely untrue," he said. "On the other side, I have priests criticizing me because I've been overly aggressive... because I don't go to bat for the priest."

But in many ways, Placa's response to the Mundy complaint is emblematic, critics say, of how he seemed to place a higher priority on protecting priests and the reputation of the diocese than on

protecting youthful victims.

A short time after McDonough met with Placa, the boy's mother went to see him at Mundy's request "to put in a good word" for the priest, who was a close family friend. But she said Placa never told her of McDonough's concern that the relationship was becoming sexual, and she had no suspicion of that herself.

During that same visit, the boy said Placa took him aside for a private chat and subtly pressured him to back off of his account.

"The whole conversation was less than two minutes," recalled the victim, now a 22-year-old actor and musician living in Manhattan.

"He said to me that he knew kids didn't get much sleep when they went on these retreats, and that was a problem because sleep deprivation could play tricks on one's mind, isn't that right? He never asked me about Mundy."

During the next three years, the man said Mundy became increasingly brazen. The priest took the teen to the back room of a gay bar where he attempted to sodomize him, bought him pornography and plied him with vodka as he begged for sexual favors.

The low point came when the teen brought a younger friend with him to Mundy's parish in Wading River, and the friend told him afterward that Mundy had sodomized him in the rectory while the older teen sang in church next door.

"I was devastated," the man said. "Until then I had thought if it was just me, I could handle it. But now, I felt like I brought someone else into the situation, and he [Mundy] took advantage of it."

The second alleged victim declined to talk to Newsday, but his attorney, Michael Dowd of Manhattan, confirmed the account.

Today, the former altar boy says he's angrier at Placa than at the priest who abused him. "Placa had good reason to believe something was going on, and he didn't ask me a thing," said the man, who asked not to be identified.

"I think he wanted to make sure I wasn't going to say or do anything," he said. "And once this passed, it opened the floodgates, because Joe [Mundy] thought it was safe."

Mundy's file was recently given to prosecutors, along with those of other accused priests, said diocesan spokeswoman Joanne Novarro. Efforts to reach the priest through friends and family were unsuccessful.

Placa, meanwhile, declined to be interviewed about this case. At Bishop William Murphy's request, Placa stepped down as vice chancellor and secretary of health affairs in mid-April. Though asked to take over a parish, he asked for and received an indefinite sabbatical, Novarro said.

A native of Brooklyn who was a close childhood friend of former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Placa was ordained in May 1970. After a four-year stint as a parish priest in Glen Cove, he was assigned to teach at the highly regarded St. Pius X Preparatory Seminary in Uniondale.

Faculty members recalled a dazzling intellect and a devoted teacher. But two former students alleged that he sometimes touched them inappropriately and said they complained to the rector, the Rev. Daniel Fagan, who has since died.

Richard Tollner, 43, a mortgage broker now living in the Albany area, said he told prosecutors he had his first encounter with the priest in January 1975, on a day that classes were out, and the teen had come in to help make banners for a Right to Life march in Washington, D.C.

He said the priest pulled out some posters in the deserted administrative area as if to show him

something, and then began fondling him - all the while making conversation about the posters.

Tollner said the incidents repeated every month or so for the next year and a half. "It was always groping," he said. "He'd draw his hand deliberately to the inside of my thigh, and over my penis. It would go on for four or five minutes, sometimes as long as 10."

A high school friend said Tollner told him about one incident soon after it occurred. "This isn't a figment of his imagination 25 years later," said Kevin Waldron of San Francisco. "He told me about it shortly after it happened. I'm certain of it."

A second former student, who asked that his name be withheld, said he described to Suffolk prosecutors what he called "the newspaper drill."

"He always had a New York Times in his office. And he'd sit down next to you on the couch in his office and open it wide and, inevitably, his hand would brush your crotch," the man said. "He did it over and over again, I can't tell you how many times."

That man said he felt so violated that he wrote Placa an unsigned letter 20 years later, blaming him for his loss of interest in pursuing the priesthood.

Placa has unequivocally denied any sexual misconduct complaints were ever brought against him, and recalled Tollner as "a troubled kid, very emotional, who would fly off the handle easily."

There is no written record of the students' complaints. But sources confirmed that the two men recently outlined their complaints to officials in the Suffolk County district attorney's office, who declined to comment, citing the confidentiality of a grand jury.

In 1978, the year after the students say they made their initial complaint, Placa left Pius to attend Hofstra University School of Law at the diocese's expense because, he said, it needed an expert in social service law.

By the time the first publicly reported cases of priest sex abuse hit the spotlight in the mid- and late-1980s, he had become a legal expert on abuse, in addition to legal counsel to the diocese and, in 1988, vice chancellor.

He crisscrossed the country giving seminars to priests, contributed a chapter in a book on priest sex abuse and consulted for the House of Affirmation in Whitinsville, Mass., a now-defunct treatment center for priests with sex abuse and other problems.

Yet even as Placa was speaking nationally, questions were being raised about how he handled allegations on Long Island.

In early 1994, he made a \$25,000 settlement with a 28-year-old abuse victim. [The priest accused was **Rev. James J. Bergin**.] The man, Raymond Trypuc, originally from Patchogue, was an admitted drug addict who had dropped out of therapy. A few weeks later, Trypuc was found dead of a cocaine overdose. Placa said he made the deal after being advised to do so by Trypuc's therapists, but officials at the centers that treated the man say their files don't reflect that and they doubt it happened.

"Giving \$25,000 to an active addict is like putting a loaded gun in someone's hand," said Fulton, the former Rockville Centre priest and addiction counselor who followed Trypuc's case at an Arizona treatment center.

Another man who said he was abused by a priest said he felt victimized all over again when he asked Placa for help to pay for his counseling.

"His position was to always not believe what I was saying and to stick up for the church," said Carlo Ciliberti, 43, of Phoenix, who said in a 1994 lawsuit that he was abused from age 12 to 17 by the **Rev. Jerry Chasse** at St. Luke's Parish in Brentwood. The suit was dismissed because it was filed outside

the statute of limitations.

"In one phone call," Ciliberti said, "he said to me after I told him about Chasse, 'What the --- do you want me to do about it?' Chasse ruined my life.". "Placa made it worse. I had to beg for everything. He just wanted me to settle and be quiet. He made me suffer even worse."

Efforts to find Chasse, who left Long Island in the late 1970s for Montana, were unsuccessful and a diocesan spokeswoman said officials have lost contact with him.

Almost from the beginning, the fact that Placa was legal counsel to the bishop at the same time that he was meeting with victims of abuse, their families, and accused priests provoked the pique of victims as well as priests.

"The Bible says you can't serve two masters," said David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests. "You're either a priest wearing your pastoral hat, or you're a lawyer looking out for the church's bottom line. I would think an attorney would tend to ask the kinds of questions designed to determine whether this person can sue and to get information that would ultimately be hurtful to them if they opted to pursue litigation."

Unless Placa specifically identified himself to victims and families as an attorney for the diocese, he could be subject to discipline by the bar, as well as potential liability, said Ellen Yaroshefsky, director of the Jacob Burns Ethics Center at Benjamin N. Cardozo Law School in Manhattan.

"If he's holding himself out as a priest who's gathering information, when in fact he's gathering information as a lawyer for the diocese, arguably he's misleading people and obtaining information they otherwise would not have given him," Yaroshefsky said.

In fact, several victims said they never understood that Placa was diocesan legal counsel when they told him their stories.

One man who told Placa about his alleged abuse by the **Rev. Matthew Fitzgerald** of St. Brigid's Church in Westbury in the mid-1980s recalled that Placa visited his home "as a representative of [Bishop John] McGann."

"At the time, I did not know who Alan Placa was and what role he played for the diocese," said the man, who asked not to be identified. "I'm telling him my story because I'm thinking we're moving forward."

After that conversation, however, he said, "there was no follow-up, no phone calls, just we'll get back to you."

Later, when he found out Placa was legal counsel for the diocese, the victim said he worried, "Did Father Placa come to speak with me as a priest who was concerned about the welfare of a victim, or did he come as a lawyer representing the diocese?"

And if Placa came as a lawyer, "could he use my testimony as a defense for the diocese?"

Fitzgerald was subsequently moved to another parish, and eventually to Florida, where additional abuse allegations were brought against him and where, two months ago, he was removed from ministry.

In an April interview, Placa said he was stepping down from the panel that reviewed complaints against priests to avoid any further questions of conflict. Murphy has since replaced that panel with an expanded group of lay and clerical representatives who operate independently and report cases directly to law enforcement.

Suffolk prosecutors also are examining the decisions by Placa and two other top church officials to place troubled priests who had been accused of sexual abuse back in ministry.

Under the policy that was in effect until recently, three clerics advised the bishop on nearly every aspect of abuse complaints.

Placa was the point person who usually met with victims and their families. He also sat on the panel that made recommendations to the bishop about how to deal with the accused priest. Other panel members were Msgr. John Alesandro, a canon lawyer, diocesan chancellor and episcopal vicar, and Msgr. James McNamara, then-priest personnel director who was succeeded in mid-1994 by Msgr. Frank Caldwell.

Even some diocesan insiders say they objected to the way the panel went about its business.

Fulton, the former director of priest health services in Rockville Centre, said he went to McGann six or seven times during the 1990s to express concern that priests with sexual issues were not getting the treatment he thought they needed and, in some cases, were returned to parish work inappropriately.

"There were a number of cases where I conferred with psychiatrists and we recommended to the diocese that people not return to active ministry, but those recommendations were ignored," Fulton said.

One of those recommendations, he said, involved the **Rev. Andrew Millar**, who is in prison after trying to molest a mentally handicapped boy in the men's room at Tobay Beach.

Millar's problems with alcohol, anxiety and sex were flagged in the mid-1990s, Fulton said. Nonetheless, he said, the priest did not get intensive help until a former altar boy came forward in 1999 to accuse the priest of molesting him eight years earlier. The priest was sent away for treatment then and, afterward, asked to retire.

"They did not seem to buy into the disease model, that these priests were sick and needed help," Fulton said. "They treated it as a moral lapse - and now they're paying the price for it."

Even after Millar's retirement, he continued to offer Mass at St. Peter & Paul in Manorville, without anyone being told his history.

Diocesan spokeswoman Novarro said Placa called Fulton's assertions "totally untrue," and said reassignment of priests was never part of his responsibility. In an earlier interview, Placa also said that no priests who were returned to ministry ever abused again, and that the bishop always made the final decision about a priest's assignment.

Caldwell, another panel member, said, however, that the three-person panel "did have discussions about whether a priest was fit to return to ministry."

In an interview in April, Placa said he saw the church's role as twofold - to provide help to the alleged victim and to arrange for the immediate psychiatric evaluation of any priest against whom a credible allegation was brought. If that evaluation showed the priest to be a danger, he said, the review team recommended his removal from parish ministry.

"Since we're not law enforcement," he said, "our responsibility is not to determine whether or not what someone says happened."

But the Mundy case shows that the process was not that clearcut, and that phrases such as "credible allegation" were often subject to differing interpretations.

Novarro said she was told Mundy's file contains no accusation at all of sexual abuse - by McDonough or anyone else. "There is a report about a complaint from Pat McDonough about confusion of roles, imprudent behavior and spending too much time with young people," she said.

"McDonough was asked straight out: 'Do you have any suspicion of sexual abuse?' And she replied, 'Absolutely not,'" Novarro said.

But McDonough dismissed that characterization of her remarks as preposterous. "No way could Alan come away from our meeting saying that I was not making allegations of sex abuse," she said. "I was very clear about that."

Asked at another point whether Mundy had received a psychiatric evaluation in keeping with diocesan policy, Novarro said one was suggested, but "Father Mundy refused to go to St. Luke's," a church-run psychiatric center in Maryland. She added, however, "He did agree to go to a private counselor here on Long Island."

Mundy resigned from the Wading River parish in 1999 and remains on an indefinite leave of absence from the diocese, Novarro said.

Looking back, the former altar boy's mother said she's ashamed she believed Mundy when he told her McDonough was making trouble for him out of some kind of professional jealousy. She said she didn't know better until her son told her when he turned 21 that he had had a sexual relationship with the priest.

"I was devastated, simply devastated," she said. "Not only did Joe use my son, but he used this entire family to advance his own agenda. This was a man who was in my home for every single Christmas Eve, and when he walked in the house, we thought God had arrived... I will live with the guilt every day for the rest of my life. "

The young man, meanwhile, said he continues to suffer from panic attacks and paralyzing bouts of rage. "My entire life as a teenager was the church," he said. "Today, I will not set foot there."

[Staff writers Steve Wick and Eden Laikin contributed to this story.]

[GRAPHIC: Photos - 1) Msgr. Alan Placa, 2) The Rev. Joseph Mundy, 3) Photo - Msgr. Alan Placa began teaching at St. Pius X Seminary Prep School in Uniondale above, in 1974. 4) Newsday Photo / Dick Yarwood - Pat McDonough says she met with Placa to discuss her concerns about a boy she believed was being sexually abused by a priest.]

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