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Priest on Leave after 4 New Sex Complaints

By Stuart Vincent
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A Long Island priest accused of sexually abusing a woman when she was a teenager has taken a six-month leave of absence at the request of his bishop after four other women came forward with similar complaints.

The Rev. John Mott, pastor at St. Catherine of Sienna Roman Catholic Church in Franklin Square, informed his congregation in the church bulletin on Jan. 1 that "Bishop John McGann, a true friend, has asked me to take a leave of absence for health reasons. He understands the pressure I am under because of the accusations against me." Mott has since left the parish.

Mott, 65, was named last August in a \$ 23-million civil suit filed in State Supreme Court in Central Islip by Janet Ostrowski, 44, of North Bellmore. The registered nurse said Mott sexually abused her for about four years beginning when she was about 15 and a member of youth groups run by Mott at St. Raphael's Roman Catholic Church in East Meadow.

The lawsuit states that Mott fondled Ostrowski - then Janet Smith - and forced her to fondle him. The suit also names the Diocese of Rockville Centre and St. Raphael's. Ostrowski has said she recovered repressed memories of being molested by Mott almost 30 years ago after seeing a television program about sexual abuse.

Msgr. Alan J. Placa, a vice chancellor for the diocese who investigates allegations of sexual misconduct by priests, said that, in accordance with diocesan policy, Mott was sent for a psychiatric evaluation soon after the charges were made. He was allowed to continue in his post after the diocese concluded, based on the evaluations, that Mott "is not a threat to any person right now," Placa said at the time.

Ostrowski's attorney, A. Craig Purcell of Hauppauge, said he now represents three other women who say they were sexually abused by Mott - Judy Milach Cajigas, 48, of Riverhead; Patricia Pollock Hastings, 48, who lives out of state; and a 44-year-old woman who asked to remain anonymous and who also now lives out of state. All three women have been in therapy for years because of the alleged abuse, according to Purcell. He said he is awaiting a court ruling on whether Ostrowski's suit can go forward before filing any legal action on behalf of the other women.

Attorney David Flowers of South Carolina represents the fourth woman who has accused Mott of sexual abuse. She now lives in that state and also asked for anonymity, he said. Flowers declined to give any specifics about her case.

Cajigas' abuse began when she was about 11 years old and a cheerleader at St. Raphael's and continued until she was about 15, Purcell said. Hastings was abused by Mott when she was in seventh and eighth grades, or from 1959-1960, he said. The third woman he represents was also a cheerleader at St. Raphael's and was abused by Mott starting when she was 11 or 12 years old and continuing for more than two years, Purcell said. Unlike the other women, he said, the abuse against her included sexual intercourse.

Purcell said he sent letters outlining the three women's claims to Bennett, Pape, Rice & Schure of Rockville Centre, which represents the diocese and St. Raphael's; Mulholland, Minion & Roe of Williston Park, which represents Mott; and Placa.

Placa said Mott underwent another psychiatric evaluation after the new complaints and again was found not to need counseling.

Attorney Kevin McDonough of Bennett, Pape, said the only legal claim his firm is dealing with regarding Mott is Ostrowski's lawsuit, although he said he had received letters regarding claims made by Purcell's other clients. The diocese has made a motion to dismiss Ostrowski's lawsuit, he said, which is strictly a legal decision and "doesn't mean that we're not concerned with the claims of Mrs. Ostrowski."

In his notice to parishioners, Mott said McGann "stands fully behind me. I can't continue to take tranquilizers and function as your pastor." Mott said he needed time to get back his "good reputation" and that "I plan to resume my duties as pastor in six months." He also wrote that he has been a priest for 38 1/2 years and stated, "I have been a good priest."

None of the four other women who accuse Mott of sexual abuse have joined in Ostrowski's lawsuit or commenced their own legal actions against Mott. Purcell said he advised the three women he represents to await a court ruling on whether Ostrowski's lawsuit will go forward before beginning legal action.

Unlike Ostrowski, he said, the others never forgot about their abuse, but didn't mention it - even to their therapists - out of shame and social pressures. As in Ostrowski's case, the statute of limitations for filing a sexual abuse lawsuit has passed. But Purcell argues that the limit should be measured not from the time of the incidents but from the moment when the memory of sexual abuse was recovered or when the alleged victims were able to talk about it.

New York is not among the 30 states that have allowed for an extension of the statute of limitations on sexual abuse cases based on repressed memory. In another local case, State Supreme Court Justice Alfred S. Robbins in November dismissed a \$ 3.75-million civil suit filed last year by a Long Island nun who said she was sexually abused by her mother superior after entering a Sea Cliff convent in 1968. Robbins noted that "New York law does not recognize psychological trauma and repression as a justification for the avoidance of the statute of limitations."

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