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Little Hope for Change: Victims Laud Grand Jury Findings, But Criticize Church Response

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Brian Dionne said he didn't need a grand jury to tell him the Catholic hierarchy engaged in systematic deception to protect sexual predators. He's known it for 40 years, he said, almost since he was first molested by a priest while serving as a choirboy.

And like many alleged victims, he is appalled at church officials' continued denials of a cover-up.

"If they don't get it now, even after everything that has gone on this past year, they're never going to get it," Dionne said Tuesday. "The truth is, I don't have too much hope that the church is going to change. The people in power seem to be thoroughly committed to covering this up even now, and it really hurts."

A day after a Suffolk County grand jury issued a blistering report accusing the Diocese of Rockville Centre of protecting priests and church assets at the expense of children, Dionne and others who say they were molested expressed exultation at the findings but also bitterness that the diocese could still deny their truth.

"The doors have been blown off the chancery," said a 41-year-old Freeport resident who told a relative of his childhood abuse for the first time three years ago. "There's a part of me that's very glad. But will I ever get any satisfaction in the long run? No. The guy who did this to me will never see a day in jail. And I'll live with what he did to me for the rest of my life."

Dionne, 51, said he implored a top official of the diocese last spring to bring his childhood molester to justice. Dionne confided one other thing to the priest: He had AIDS, and feared he didn't have much time left.

The official promised to look into his complaint that the **Rev. John Butler** had molested Dionne and more than a dozen other boys in the choir at St. Joseph's in Kings Park where Butler had been a choirmaster 40 years ago.

"I said, 'I've heard that from officials before,'" Dionne recalled replying. "And I'm quite sick. Do you promise to get back to me?' And he said, 'Of course, of course, I will.'"

But the Brooklyn man said he never heard anything back, even after leaving subsequent messages. "Here it is 10 months later, and still not a peep," he said Tuesday.

Despite complaints about Butler that spanned 35 years, during which Butler was transferred several times, Butler continued to work as a priest until last April, when Dionne made repeated calls to his superiors in Metuchen, N.J., who finally put him on leave. Newsday has been unable to reach Butler for comment, and Rockville Centre officials did not respond to calls Tuesday.

Another alleged victim, Donna Nichols, expressed contempt at the diocese's complaint that it did not get to read the report before its public release.

Nichols, 48, of East Northport, who testified before the grand jury, said she had been abused by a former priest, **Nicholas Unterstein**, in Huntington Station more than 30 years ago, along with her younger sister. Unterstein could not be reached.

"They never seemed the least bit interested in what I had to say for the past 35 years or so," Nichols said in a written statement with her husband. "Speaking of unfair, how about the way I and all those other little boys and girls were treated by them!!?"

Carlo Cilberti, 40, who said he was abused on Long Island before moving to Arizona, said he felt a sense of catharsis from the report, but believes that things will change only when statutes of limitations are lifted for child sex abuse cases.

His need to tell his story was so great that he flew in last year to testify to the grand jury. "I wanted them to know," he said.

He remains bitter about the diocese's failure to respond to two decades of his pleas for help.

His first call for help was a note left in a collection basket. "I wrote it out and put it in an envelope with 25 one-dollar bills. I wrote, 'I want to let you know what happened to me in this church. I would like someone to get in touch with me.' I put in my name, telephone number and address and the name of the priest, **Jerry Chasse**."

A few years later, he did the same thing. Again, he got no response. His suit against the diocese was dismissed in the mid-1990s because the statute of limitations had expired.

Cilberti said Priest I in the grand jury report is Chasse, and he feels vindicated to see his story included in the report. Chasse could not be reached.

One of at least a dozen alleged victims of the **Rev. Eugene Vollmer** said he also felt relief. "As much as it hurt to retell it, I was grateful for the Suffolk grand jury," said the man, who identified Vollmer as "priest D" in the report.

Last March, Newsday detailed allegations against Vollmer, then an associate pastor at St. James Church in Seaford. Two former altar boys, Mark and Rainer Welzel, were quoted as saying Vollmer abused them over several years in the 1970s when they were teenagers.

Both brothers said they reported the abuse to diocesan officials and nothing came of it. Vollmer continued to work as a parish priest -- until the day last March when Newsday called diocesan officials asking for comment.

Vollmer admitted to diocesan officials that he had molested at least 12 victims, according to the grand jury report, which characterizes the priest as a "serial child molester." Vollmer did not respond to requests for comment.

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