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Church Strips Priest of Duties

Unprecedented step follows sex abuse probe

By Stuart Vincent
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For the first time ever, the Diocese of Rockville Centre has permanently relieved a priest of pastoral duties following allegations that he sexually abused a boy two decades ago and the discovery last year of pornography in his room.

The Roman Catholic diocese took the action last month against the Rev. Kenneth Hasselbach of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Patchogue, according to Msgr. Alan J. Placa, a vice chancellor for the diocese. "He will not work as a priest anywhere," Placa said.

[Photo captions: The Rev. Kenneth Hasselbach. Sammarco left, as an altar boy when he was about 12. Sammarco now 37.]

Hasselbach, 53, recently had a stroke and is hospitalized. Placa said his health also was a factor in the decision not to allow him to return to pastoral work. At Newsday's request, Placa passed along a request for an interview. The priest declined to comment, Placa said.

The diocese initially removed Hasselbach from his parish last year after a pornographic videotape was found in his possession, Placa said. He already was in psychiatric treatment when an East Meadow man complained last summer that Hasselbach had sodomized and fondled him as a boy over a period of years.

Citing diocesan policy, Placa would not divulge the results of his investigation into the allegations of abuse. The diocese's policy of placing a priest in counseling after an allegation is received does not imply guilt, Placa said.

Placa confirmed that there have been other cases of alleged sexual abuse by diocesan priests. A second priest was removed from his parish and ordered into psychiatric care last year following an allegation that he fondled and sodomized a young boy almost two decades ago. He completed the treatment and ultimately may resume the duties of a priest, although he has told diocesan officials that he does not plan to return to work in the Rockville Centre diocese, Placa said.

During the 1980s, a third priest was the subject of two complaints of sexual abuse. The priest resigned in 1989 rather than go through a mandated psychiatric evaluation, Placa said. As a result, Placa said, the diocese never investigated the allegations.

Last June, diocese spokesman John Kal said in a Newsday story that Rockville Centre had never received a complaint of sexual abuse against any of the diocese's 471 priests. After that story, Newsday received calls about Hasselbach and the other two priests.

Placa said Kal's statement had been incorrect and confirmed the three cases.

"Yes, there have certainly been accusations," he said. "You have named three cases and I can confirm to you that there have been more than three cases, but I will treat all of those as confidential."

One of those who called Newsday after reading Kal's statement was Robert Sammarco, 37, of East Meadow. He also lodged a complaint with the diocese against Hasselbach, saying he had been too

ashamed to speak earlier.

Under a policy put into place about seven years ago, once an allegation is lodged, the diocese removes a priest from his parish and orders him to undergo a psychiatric evaluation by a physician not affiliated with the diocese. Based on the results, a priest may then be ordered into long-term psychiatric care. Priests who admit to sexual misconduct also may be returned to parish work if psychiatrists feel there is no long-term problem,

Because of the videotape, Hasselbach was already under psychiatric care, Placa said. The diocese notified Hasselbach's doctors of Sammarco's allegation, he said.

Under its policy, the diocese also offered to pay for counseling for Sammarco, Placa said. Sammarco, who had only recently started therapy, accepted.

Sammarco never tried to lodge criminal charges, and the five-year statute of limitations has long since expired. And Sammarco said he is not pursuing civil action because lawyers have advised him that the statute of limitations for a possible lawsuit has also expired.

The diocese investigated the allegations by talking to Sammarco, Hasselbach, the priest's co-workers and some parishioners. "We've spoken to a lot of people . . . including priests and lay people who would have been in a position to make careful observations over the past years," Placa said.

The results went to Bishop John R. McGann, who as head of the diocese had the ultimate say on whether the priest would return to his parish. Placa said McGann would not comment.

The diocese does not make public the results of any investigation, Placa said. Nor does it turn results over to civil authorities. "Our focus is never to determine the truth or falsehood of these charges in a judicial way, but to offer help," Placa said. "And we did that."

Under New York State law, clergy are not required to report cases of suspected child abuse. Placa said the clergy were exempted because of the confidential relationship they have with church members. Last year, authorities on Long Island investigated almost 900 cases of alleged sexual abuse of children. Officials in both counties said they have never had a case involving a member of the clergy from a major religious group.

After Sammarco contacted Newsday, Placa confirmed that the diocese had received the complaint about Hasselbach. The diocese never asked for a written statement from Sammarco, nor did it provide him with a written copy of the results of the investigation.

Sammarco said he told the diocese that Hasselbach had fondled and sodomized him for several years beginning in the late 1960s. Sammarco said the abuse began at St. Raphael's Church rectory in East Meadow when he was about 12 after he and Hasselbach had returned from an outing.

"I was an altar boy and he got friendly with the family and he went ice skating with me. He would take me back to the rectory," he said in an interview. Sammarco said the abuse continued when Hasselbach would take him to the priest's former parish, St. Jude's Church in Mastic-Shirley; on a weekend trip to Manhattan; and on a week-long vacation to Puerto Rico.

Sammarco, who said he once considered becoming a priest, said he stopped the abuse when he was almost 17. "I couldn't do it any more," he said, noting that it was easier to break away because Hasselbach had been transferred to another parish and the abuse had become less frequent. "It was almost like I was ashamed of what I was doing. It wasn't that he was doing something wrong; I was doing something wrong."

He said he did not complain at the time because he was ashamed. But he was moved by the Kal statement. "When they said there had been no reported cases, I knew I couldn't be the only one," he said.

Today, he said, "I'm a very angry person. . . Either I'm waiting for somebody to say something to me,

so I can get into some sort of physical confrontation to release some of the anger, or, if you say something to me, I'm going to crawl up into a ball and cry in a corner for a couple of hours."

After complaining to the diocese, he discovered that Hasselbach already had been removed from Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Patchogue in April. Placa said he had been ordered into a psychiatric hospital after a priest at Mt. Carmel borrowed what he thought was a blank videotape from Hasselbach and found it contained pornography. Placa said he could not elaborate on what was on the tape because he never saw it.

Parishioners at the church were never formally told why Hasselbach had been removed. Rev. Robert O'Connell, pastor of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Patchogue declined to comment on the diocese's action.

Placa, the author of several articles on sexual abuse by priests, said he believed notification of parishioners wasn't necessary because officials don't believe anyone else will come forward with complaints against Hasselbach.

In general, he said, parishioners are not notified during investigations because the allegation may prove to be false or the diocese is satisfied that there's only one victim. "If we determine there is no reason to believe there were other victims, we don't then put out a general notice that, 'An accusation was made and if you know anything, let us know.'"

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