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Accused Priests Told to Resign

Long Island's bishop demands some accused of molestation leave priesthood

By Steve Wick, Carol Eisenberg and Eden Laikin
Newsday
March 13, 2002

In his first move against clergy sex abuse, the bishop of the diocese of Rockville Centre is demanding that some priests who have been accused of molesting boys formally resign from the priesthood.

"For the good of the church, I want you out," the Rev. Brian McKeon said he was told by Bishop William F. Murphy in a tense meeting in November.

While Murphy declined to comment, his demand that McKeon and others resign from the priesthood based on sexual abuse complaints is another indication that he is taking steps to address a problem that has attracted nationwide attention. Last week, Nassau District Attorney Denis Dillon said Murphy would turn over to him all past sex abuse complaints made to the diocese.

McKeon, 51, said Murphy called him into his office and told him to apply for laicization, a lengthy process that involves asking the pope to relieve him of the duties and obligations of the priesthood.

McKeon said he made a "mistake" more than a decade ago by inappropriately touching young boys. "I was wrong and I admitted I was wrong," McKeon said in an interview. After a complaint was made against him, McKeon said, he was removed as pastor at St. Anne's in Garden City and told by diocesan officials to get psychological counseling.

After undergoing treatment at a center in Canada, he said, he returned to the diocese to continue working as a priest. Until last fall, McKeon was working as a chaplain at Nassau University Medical Center as well as serving Mass on weekends at Our Lady of Good Counsel in Mattituck.

Since the initial complaints, he said, he has not been involved in any further sexual incidents involving children.

"I did everything I was told," he said. "I wanted to stay a priest, but I now know that won't be possible."

A second priest told by Murphy to put in his papers to leave the priesthood is Michael R. Hands, who pleaded guilty last week in Nassau County for sexually assaulting a boy between the ages of 13 and 15. According to sources, other priests have been confronted by Murphy since November, but details on those individuals were not available yesterday.

It remains unclear what criteria Murphy is using in selecting those asked to leave.

Murphy is expected to make a policy announcement on the issue of sexual abuse in today's issue of the Long Island Catholic, the diocese's official newspaper. He has declined all interviews on that subject until his statement is released.

Last week, Newsday reported that Murphy had agreed to turn over to Dillon years of sexual abuse complaints. In an interview, Dillon said that he had asked for all complaints, even those beyond the five-year statute of limitations.

"I'm going to be interested in any and all cases of pedophilia which have been reported to religious authorities and have not been reported to law enforcement authorities," Dillon said yesterday.

Additionally, he said, he had received "two or three complaints" recently from the public.

No files have been turned over to Suffolk District Attorney Thomas Spota's office, officials there said yesterday.

Msgr. Alan Placa, vice chancellor of the diocese, said last week that he knew nothing about the laicizations. "If there are priests who have begun a process of applying for laicization, that's a private matter between them and the Holy See," he said.

Victims' advocates said they had mixed feelings about Murphy's actions to date. "Yes, it's progress," said David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, based in Chicago. "On the other hand, it's tragic that it took a scandal the size of Boston to motivate Bishop Murphy to act.

"The real test of leadership is to act when it happens, not years later," Clohessy added. "People who are caught have to be prosecuted immediately."

Nationwide, the scandal over child sexual abuse by priests and cover-up by the Catholic church has shaken the institution, causing priests and even bishops to resign and costing the church almost \$1 billion in payouts to victims, by some estimates. Advocacy groups say dioceses nationwide have settled 1,600 cases - nearly all in which secrecy agreements were signed by the parties - involving priests and children.

The recent case in Boston of John Geoghan, a former priest convicted of fondling a 10-year-old boy and accused of molesting more than 130 other children, has brought the issue into sharp focus. Documents filed with the court showed that Boston's Cardinal Bernard Law and other church leaders knew of the accusations, but shuttled Geoghan from parish to parish without informing congregants of his past behavior or referring the complaints to law enforcement officials.

Murphy, who was a top diocesan official in Boston during part of Geoghan's time, is named in four suits that were settled yesterday.

By his actions on Long Island, Murphy is reversing long-standing practices in which many complaints were kept private, lawsuit settlements were sealed, and priests were sent away for counseling before returning to parish work, being assigned to jobs away from children, or quietly retired.

For instance, Kenneth Hasselbach, who was publicly accused in 1994 of molesting a 12-year-old altar boy at St. Raphael's in East Meadow 20 years earlier, was allowed to retire quietly.

In an interview yesterday, Hasselbach, who lives in Florida, admitted abusing Robert Sammarco, but said Sammarco's version of the incidents "was a bit exaggerated." He said he also believed his victim was older than 12 or 13 when the incidents occurred.

The case of James C. Miller is another example of how the issue has been addressed in the past. Miller was sued along with the diocese in 1994 for allegedly sexually abusing two teenage boys at St. John the Baptist High School in West Islip. After the complaint, Miller was removed from working with children, and sent to Catholic University in Washington, D.C., to study canon law.

The case was settled, but sealed and is unavailable to the public. However, sources have said that the diocese made a cash settlement in the case, and agreed to pay for counseling for the youths. Additionally, the victims signed agreements saying they would never discuss the case, the sources said.

In an interview, Miller said the accusations against him were false. He said he wanted to fight them, but the diocese settled the case without telling him. "I wanted to clear my name, but they just went ahead and settled it," he said. "That was wrong."

Miller said he requested a leave of absence from his duties two years ago, but he remains a priest.

[Staff writer Shirley Perlman contributed to this story.]

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