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Man Settles in Priest Abuse Case

Victim to Get More than \$100,000 after Lawsuit against Two Dioceses

By Scott Travis

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A man who accused a former priest of sexually abusing him has settled with the Catholic dioceses of Palm Beach and Rockville Centre, N.Y., for an undisclosed amount of money.

The 28-year-old man, identified in court papers as John Doe, will receive "well in excess" of \$100,000, his lawyer, Andrew Pelino, said. The man did not want to reveal the exact amount, Pelino said.

The man said that when he was 15 years old, Matthew Fitzgerald, then a priest at Ascension Catholic Church in Boca Raton, molested him. The man kept the matter to himself until revealing it during a family argument in 2000, Pelino said.

The lawsuit alleged that officials at the Diocese of Rockville Centre on Long Island and the Diocese of Palm Beach covered up years of sexual misconduct by Fitzgerald before he had his rights to serve as a priest revoked in 2002. Fitzgerald could not be reached for comment Friday. His lawyer, Stephen Muffler, declined to comment.

The lawsuit against the Diocese of Palm Beach was settled last week, while the Rockville Centre case was settled on Wednesday, Pelino said. The alleged victim now is married and is glad to put the matter behind him, Pelino said.

"I think he feels some relief, and I hope he will obtain some level of satisfaction from the fact that he and his family had the fortitude and courage to stand up to the leadership of these two dioceses and hold them accountable for their conduct," Pelino said.

The Diocese of Palm Beach has had to deal with at least six cases of alleged sexual abuse by clergymen in recent years. Two Palm Beach County bishops resigned over sexual-abuse allegations, J. Keith Symons in 1998 and Anthony J. O'Connell in 2002.

With this settlement, the diocese has no more pending litigation involving sexual abuse, spokesman Jim Brosemer said.

Bishop Gerald Barbarito wants any other victims to come forward "so that some type of pastoral care can be extended," according to the statement. They are encouraged to call victim-assistance coordinator Theresa Fretterd, 561-801-0999.

The Rockville Centre diocese offered a similar response, saying that its lawyers advised it to settle. It, too, has set up a hotline for sexual-abuse victims of its diocese, 516-594-9063.

Pelino said the lawsuit should not be viewed as bashing the Catholic Church.

"There are many wonderful, dedicated priests who serve our county and South Florida with distinction and honor," he said. "This is not about those folks. It's about the small subset of leaders there who put the interests of a priest over the interest of the innocent teenager."

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