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Church: Insufficient Evidence

Accused priest to return

By Rita Ciolli
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After a diocesan tribunal and Catholic Church officials in Rome found insufficient evidence that the Rev. Michael Carroll had sexually abused minors, Bishop William Murphy is returning him to ministry. Carroll is the first local priest to get his collar back since the clerical sexual abuse scandal broke on Long Island two years ago.

Carroll, 48, will be living at St. Christopher Church in Baldwin where he had previously resided, according to a brief announcement that recently appeared in the parish bulletin. He is assigned to Villa St. Joseph, a convent on the grounds of Mercy Medical Center in Rockville Centre, where he says Mass for the sisters there.

However, he will not be returning to the hospital where he was a chaplain before his suspension in the spring of 2002, said the Rev. James Vlaun, a spokesman for the diocese. Vlaun described Carroll's gradual return as a pastoral decision Murphy made "so that the priest can, once again, adjust to his life" and the diocese can "adjust to this priest ministering again."

Carroll was allowed to get his clerical collar back earlier this year after a local review board, appointed by Murphy in the wake of the scandal, reviewed the allegations against him last year. The leader of the Diocese of Rockville Centre addressed the issue in a February "Letter to the Faithful," when he wrote: "The Review Board declared one priest to have insufficient evidence against him. I submitted his case to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which exonerated him after a review of the evidence and he has been returned to ministry."

Vlaun said Carroll is the priest cited by Murphy in that letter mailed to all 414,000 Catholic households in Nassau and Suffolk.

Carroll's case is cited in last year's Suffolk County grand jury report, which detailed individual abuse cases as well as the diocese's treatment of victims and problem priests. In four pages, the report describes Priest P - who sources say is Carroll - as someone who had left several parishes suddenly and had complaints against him of "inappropriate sexual conduct" with a teenage boy as well as young men over age 18.

Carroll did not respond to telephone calls to the parish rectory seeking comment. Vlaun also relayed a request to him for an interview.

Vlaun said that in returning Carroll to ministry, the diocese "as in all cases, meticulously followed the procedures outlined in the American church's "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People"] in accordance with the norms." The guidelines stipulate that a priest must be removed for even one instance of abuse of any minor, whether admitted or proven, a policy known as "zero tolerance."

Carroll's case, he added, was an example of how the new system works. "We can assure everyone that there is no one in pastoral ministry about whom there has been any credible allegation of sexual abuse of a minor," Vlaun said.

Murphy, who is under pressure from priests of the diocese to ensure that their accused colleagues are

treated fairly and in accordance with church laws, went further than what the charter requires, Vlaun noted. He said the bishop had Carroll's case reviewed by church officials in Rome "and that they, too, affirmed the findings."

However, no minors or their families came forward to the tribunal with complaints about Carroll, which left the board without any evidence that Carroll's behavior came under the jurisdiction of the charter, sources familiar with his case said.

Others cases under review

At the time of Carroll's suspension, the abuse controversy had enveloped the local diocese and Murphy ordered a review of all priests who had abuse complaints against them. While his case has been resolved, the files of 11 other Long Island priests with abuse complaints against them are still being reviewed at the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith - the Vatican office which determines when a priest can be put on trial in the church - diocese officials said.

Those priests, whom the diocese would not identify, remain on administrative leave. Six other accused priests in the diocese were eligible for retirement or medical disability and elected to take those benefits in return for accepting permanent suspension from pastoral ministry, according to the diocese.

As the diocese and Carroll try to move forward, supporters are expressing hope and critics concern.

The Web site for St. Christopher's parish, where Carroll will be living, recently announced his return, saying the priest "is resuming residence with us. He and all of us are so grateful for your prayers." Msgr. John Bennett, pastor, referred requests for further comment to the diocese.

However, for Voice of the Faithful, a lay group that was founded after the scandal broke to monitor the diocese's handling of abuse victims as well as to support priests of integrity, there are lingering concerns. Just one sentence in a parish bulletin about Carroll's return does not fulfill Murphy's promise that the community would be adequately informed when a suspended priest was returned to ministry, the group contends.

"Given that the diocese is fully aware of Father Carroll's background, LI-VOTF believes that it is irresponsible to once again give him access to the parishioners of this diocese in the position of priest," said Dan Bartley, co-director of the group.

Ordained in 1985, Carroll has served as an associate pastor at St. Catherine of Sienna in Franklin Square, St. Barnabas the Apostle in Bellmore, St. Raymond in East Rockaway, Saints Philip and James in St. James, and on weekend duty at Our Lady of Hope in Carle Place.

File given to grand jury

When he was first removed from his duties, Carroll's suspension received scant public attention. However, the grand jury subpoenaed church files in the course of its investigation into how diocesan officials handled the cases of priests accused of sexually abusing minors. In response, the diocese turned over Carroll's file, which contained letters of complaints about his behavior from a nun and from pastors who supervised him as well as notes from a top diocesan official.

Those complaints were described in part of an 180-page grand jury report that was released in February of last year. Because the report was a recommendation for new legislation and not an indictment, it did not identify by name any of the close to two dozen individual priests with allegations against them, but instead identified each with a letter of the alphabet.

The grand jury report found that "Priest P" invited boys into his private room, even after being warned by the pastor it was against the rules, watched adult movies with the boys, and in other instances, gave a public back-rub to a 15-year-old and put his hand inside the boy's shirt and rubbed his nipple, and gave foot massages to other teens.

The report, citing the internal notes of a high-ranking diocese official, said one pastor described Priest

P to him as "an accident looking for a place to happen." A letter from another pastor, also quoted in the grand jury report, said he had concerns whether the priest "could manage his sexual desires."

A spokesman for Suffolk County District Attorney Tom Spota declined yesterday to comment on the identity of any of the priests mentioned in the grand jury report.

Vlaun had no comment on whether Priest P is Carroll. However, he did make note of the diocese's long-standing criticism of the accuracy of the grand jury report, saying the panelists misinterpreted events and records and that witnesses were not subject to cross-examination.

Nevertheless, the report's findings should raise concerns about Carroll's reinstatement, Bartley said. "We are talking about sexual abuse, not an 'accident,'" he said. "Given that the diocese is fully aware of Father Carroll's background, is it prepared to take full financial and legal responsibility if an 'accident' happens?"

[GRAPHIC: Photo - The Rev. Michael Carroll]

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