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## Key Figure in Diocese Scandal

Ex-priest let out of jail

In custody since January of last year, he had pleaded guilty to sexually abusing a young teen

By Keiko Morris

Newsday

May 1, 2004

Michael Hands, a defrocked Roman Catholic priest who was a central figure in the sexual abuse scandal within the Diocese of Rockville Centre, was released from jail Friday morning, officials said.

Hands, 37, left the Suffolk County Correctional Facility in Riverhead at 8:45 a.m. He had been in custody since Jan. 13 of last year, said Suffolk County Undersheriff Walter Denzler.

Hands received a 2-year jail term in Suffolk after pleading guilty in February of last year to charges of sodomy and attempted sodomy of a young teen whose family he befriended while he was a parish priest.

He also was sentenced in March of last year in Nassau to a 6-month jail term and 5 years probation after pleading guilty to five counts of sodomy and two counts of endangering the welfare of a child, the same young teen. That jail term was served concurrently with his Suffolk sentence.

Hands was a key witness for the Suffolk County grand jury that investigated the allegations of sexual abuse of minors by priests. The grand jury report, released last year, contained scathing criticisms of the diocese, saying it failed to protect children from sexual abuse and attempted to conceal criminal actions of its priests.

The diocese released a statement Friday saying its members are reminded of "the need for continued vigilance in our efforts to reverence and protect all children entrusted in our care."

"We continue to work towards healing for all in our church," the statement said.

Hands was categorized as a Level 2 sex offender after a Nassau County hearing, meaning he will be listed on the state's Sex Offender Registry until March 2013, unless he violates probation.

Hands has not yet had a hearing to determine his risk level in Suffolk County, where prosecutors say they will request Hands be labeled as a Level 3 sex offender, the category deemed to be at the highest risk for re-offending. Robert Clifford, the spokesman for the Suffolk County district attorney's office, said a hearing date will most likely be determined by next week.

John J. Carway, director of Nassau County probation, said information about where Hands is staying and details about his supervision are confidential.

[Photo caption: Michael Hands.]