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## 2 Suits: Diocese Failed Us

34 men seek millions, citing church role in sex abuse cover-up

By Rita Ciolli  
Newsday  
April 15, 2003

Claiming the Diocese of Rockville Centre failed to protect children in Catholic churches and schools from predatory priests and then deliberately concealed the problem, 34 men filed lawsuits in State Supreme Court in Mineola yesterday asking for hundreds of millions of dollars in damages because they said they were sexually abused.

[Photo captions: Brian Compasso. Bishop William Murphy in February, not long after the Suffolk grand jury issued its report. Lawyer Michael Dowd, center, with plaintiffs Brian Dionne, left, and John Salveson. Plaintiffs Brian Dionne, left, and John Salveson, right, with attorney Michael Dowd.]

The two lawsuits detail alleged abuse by 17 priests and two religious brothers in incidents that span almost the entire history of the Long Island diocese, which was founded in 1957. The suits claim the diocese should pay monetary damages to these men because for decades there was "a deliberate covert policy" of hindering criminal prosecution of priests and preventing the filing of civil lawsuits by victims. This was done to prevent "scandal among parishioners and public" and "the loss of financial contributions," according to the legal papers.

Page after page of the lawsuits portrays what the accusers see as a betrayal of trust by priests who were honored and revered in their parishes. Almost every one of the men who claimed they were abused went to parochial schools or were altar servers and came from families who were very involved in their parishes and Catholic life.

Many of their parents were religious education teachers and members of the Rosary and Holy Name societies. They let their sons go on overnight trips with priests - where the abuse often began - then their alleged victims watched as the same priests later came to their homes for dinner, baptized their siblings and married and buried family members.

"Our parents thought they were doing the right thing to make us go to religious education and join a church group so we wouldn't be hanging out on the street corner. It turned out to be the worst experience of our lives," said Brian Compasso, 42, of Lake Ronkonkoma, a clerk at a 7-Eleven store.

The lawsuits come two months after a scathing Suffolk County grand jury report described how priests accused of molesting children were shuffled to different parishes and how the diocese used "deception and intimidation" to deal with their accusers.

The diocese is expected to ask the court to dismiss the lawsuits because the claims are being filed after the statute of limitations had expired. If the lawsuits overcome this major legal hurdle, the litigation could result in the release of internal church documents and sworn statements by its top officials.

"The diocese intends to defend this case vigorously, as any other institution in our society has a right and an obligation to do," said Joanne Novarro, a spokeswoman for the diocese. Rockville Centre joins dozens of dioceses, including Boston and Los Angeles, in defending civil cases stemming from the abuse scandal.

The two lawsuits were made public at news conferences held by the attorneys who filed the

complaints, Melanie Little of Garden City and Michael Dowd of Manhattan. While the legal arguments contending abuse and neglect are similar in both lawsuits because the attorneys shared information, the Little filing goes further by asking for \$1 billion in punitive damages.

"There is a mountain of evidence that what the diocese did was perpetuate a fraud on the Catholics of Long Island and the general public. They knew the schools and the churches were not safe, they were infested with pedophiles," said Little, who said the diocese needed to be punished for its moral culpability in hiding the abuse for so long.

While the permissible time period allowed to file lawsuits in every one of the 34 cases has already expired, state law makes an exception in cases in which fraud or negligence was concealed. Little and Dowd argue the culpability of the diocese was not exposed until the Suffolk grand jury report was made public.

"Citizens sitting as a grand jury have found as fact that the Rockville Centre Diocese has orchestrated a conspiracy of deception, a suppression of facts," said Dowd. The grand jury brought no criminal charges because the statute of limitations had expired.

Named defendants in the lawsuits because of their supervisory roles include the current leader, Bishop William Murphy, as well as his predecessors Walter Kellenberg, John McGann and James McHugh, all now deceased.

Both attorneys say Murphy is responsible for the fraud even though he took over the diocese in September 2001, after most of the incidents had occurred. In making a claim for punitive damages, Little said that as late as March 2002 Murphy told the public there was no priest serving who had credible allegations against him, only to remove from ministry the Rev. Angelo Ditta and the Rev. Eugene Vollmer days later after their alleged victims spoke to the press. Also named as defendants are three monsignors who dealt with abuse claims and, though not named, figured prominently in the grand jury report. They are Msgr. Alan Placa, who is challenging Bishop Murphy's decision to suspend him from performing priestly duties, and Msgr. Francis Caldwell, who heads the Office of Priest Personnel. Msgr. John Alesandro, who ran the diocese for nine months after McHugh's death, is named in only one of the lawsuits. He is the pastor of St. Dominic's in Oyster Bay.

Placa, who is working at the consulting firm of former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, said "no comment, ever to Newsday" when reached at his Manhattan office. Alesandro did not return a call to his parish office seeking comment. Caldwell's office referred all calls to Novarro.

Among the 17 priests named in the lawsuits as abusers are some who have figured prominently in media reports, such as Msgr. Charles Ribaldo, former chaplain of Holy Trinity Diocesan High School in Hicksville, and some who were never previously identified as alleged abusers, such as **Msgr. Raymond Stegman**, a contemporary of Kellenberg's who died in June 2000. Ribaldo, who is being sued by two men, has strenuously denied any abuse.

Among the defendants are seven priests and two religious brothers who were not publicly named before, expanding the total number of clerics who have been accused as abusers in the Long Island diocese to at least 35 priests and brothers.

The diocese, which has about \$11 million in a special fund to handle abuse claims, said it will fight the charges but declined to provide specifics yesterday. Murphy said in February that the diocese will make no payments to victims unless ordered by a court. "Once diocesan officials and their attorneys have had an opportunity to examine this suit in depth, we will respond appropriately," said Novarro.

Dowd said he sent a copy of his legal papers on Friday to the diocesan law firm of Spellman, Walsh, Rice Shure and Markus of Garden City. Little said she will serve the diocese with her complaint today.

The lawsuits filed yesterday are expected to bring forward even more plaintiffs with potential abuse claims, said Dowd and Little. Dowd said he had another 17 clients who are deciding whether they want to go public by putting their name on a lawsuit. Yet to be filed is the lawsuit by the teenage

victim of the Rev. Michael Hands, who is serving a jail term after pleading guilty to multiple counts of sexual molestation. "That one is definitely within the statute of limitations," said Dowd. Two other attorneys representing multiple new plaintiffs have said they plan to file lawsuits in a few weeks.

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