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Lawsuits Detail Allegations of Abuse

By Eden Laikin
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Two lawsuits filed yesterday detailed for the first time sexual abuse allegations against nine Catholic priests and brothers. The information that follows comes from statements included in the complaints. Unless otherwise noted, those accused could not be reached to comment. A spokeswoman for the Diocese of Rockville Centre, Joanne Novarro, said the diocese intends to defend the case "vigorously, as any other institution in our society has a right and an obligation to do."

The Rev. Alfred Soave

He is accused of fondling a 13-year-old altar boy in the late 1970s when he served at St. Hugh of Lincoln Parish in Huntington Station. The victim believes that Soave is the "Priest T" referred to in a Suffolk County grand jury report released earlier this year. The report says Priest T was sent for therapy after multiple allegations of abuse and when it was recommended he not be returned to the ministry, was given the title of "Vicar for Senior Priests." Soave died in March 1999.

[Photo captions: Among the accused are, from left, the Rev. Alfred Soave, the Rev. Robert Saccacio and Msgr. Raymond Stegman.]

The Rev. John Mahoney

Allegedly spanked and caressed the bare buttocks of an 11-year-old altar boy from St. Barnabas the Apostle Church in Bellmore on a trip to West Point that he organized in 1967. After arranging to be alone with the boy, Mahoney told him to remove his shorts and, holding him against his leg, spanked him. The suit contends that future attempts to molest the boy "occurred in the sacristy, the bell tower and in defendant's car."

Msgr. Raymond Stegman

While working in the diocese's business office, Stegman is accused of fondling and sodomizing a 17-year-old sacristan from Notre Dame Parish in New Hyde Park in the 1970s. The abuse allegedly took place in hotels, at St. Gertrude's in Bayville where Stegman was pastor and at the priest's mother's house. Stegman died in June 2000.

Brother Finnian McGee

McGee is accused of groping and rubbing against a 12-year-old boy in the early 1970s at St. Joseph's Parish school in Babylon. McGee, a Franciscan brother and the boy's sixth-grade homeroom teacher, allegedly molested the boy in the classroom and his private school office.

The Rev. Basil Peter Congro

After Congro met his accuser in a confessional at St. Mary's Church in East Islip in the early 1980s, he allegedly groped and sodomized the boy between the ages of 15 and 19 in the church rectory, in Congro's car, at Smith Point County Park, in various gay clubs and in the confessional. Congro died in July 1999. [See correction below.]

The Rev. Richard Schaefer

Between 1958 and 1961, Schaefer was in charge of a group of young boys who wanted to be priests at St. Philip Neri Church in Northport. Schaefer's accuser says Schaefer would touch, kiss and fondle him while telling him that he loved him and that the contact was normal. The suit says the priest abused him on trips, in the rectory, in the priest's car, and once when Schaefer came to his house to hear confession because the boy was sick.

The Rev. Robert Saccacio

Saccacio is accused of fondling an altar boy in the church sacristy at St. John of God Church in Central Islip in the 1970s. The abuse allegedly started when the boy was 11 and ended when he was 14, after the boy told his parents and they forbid him to continue being an altar boy. In May, Bishop William Murphy stripped the longtime pastor of his ability to work as a priest because of other accusations of abuse. Saccacio was allowed to retire then. While he confirmed the reason for Murphy's action against him, Saccacio said yesterday that he knew nothing about these allegations against him. When asked if they were true, he said, "I think I need a lawyer to answer that question."

Brother Howard Murphy

A Marist brother, Murphy met his accuser at St. Mary's High School in Manhasset around 1984 and "sexually and psychologically abused" him.

The Rev. William Michael Burke

Burke is accused of sexually abusing an elementary school student at St. Lawrence the Martyr in Sayville in the early 1970s. The first time he sexually abused the plaintiff, the suit said, Burke was a deacon at the parish. Burke died in a house fire in 1995.

These priests who also have been named in the lawsuits previously have been identified in legal papers or news accounts: the Revs. Eugene Vollmer, Robert Huneke, Brian McKeon, James Bergin, Matthew Fitzgerald, Joseph Mundy, Angelo Ditta and Msgr. Charles Ribaudo.

Correction:

An April 15 story on two lawsuits filed against the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rockville Centre incorrectly stated that the Rev. Basil Peter Congro died in 1999. Congro is alive and currently on administrative leave from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Charleston, S.C.