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Leaving a Trail of Accusations

At least 7 priests were moved from LI

By Eden Laikin
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In the mid-1980s, the **Rev. Matthew Fitzgerald** was accused of sexually molesting a teenager at St. Brigid's Roman Catholic Church in Westbury. Soon afterward, he was packed off to a diocese in Florida that was told only that Fitzgerald needed to move south because of his "allergies."

But the problems didn't end there.

Fitzgerald has since been the subject of four separate complaints about sexual misconduct at two parishes in Florida. And two weeks ago - 17 years after the Diocese of Rockville Centre first learned of allegations against Fitzgerald, according to his alleged victim - Florida officials stripped him of his ability to work as a priest.

Fitzgerald's story is not uncommon. In a pattern that critics say mirrors nationwide trends, at least seven priests have been moved from Long Island to other dioceses after they were accused of sexually abusing children. It is a practice that experts say can be dangerous to the community, and one that Long Island church officials now say they will no longer condone.

The church has "come to grips with the fact that ... [child molestation] is not curable," explained Joanne Novarro, a spokeswoman for the Diocese of Rockville Center, "and we will not place priests back into priestly ministry if they have a history or any allegations of child molestation after they go through the review process."

Moving priests who have been accused of molesting children is "neither an acceptable risk for the community, nor proper treatment," said Dr. Frederick Berlin, founder of the Sexual Disorders Clinic at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Md. "We teach people who have an attraction to children that they should not unnecessarily risk temptation."

Five of Long Island's accused priests - Fitzgerald, the Rev. Thomas DeVita, the Rev. Peter Duvelsdorf, the Rev. Salvatore Miraglia and the Rev. Robert Huneke - wound up in Florida. The Rev. Jerry Chasse went to Montana, where he worked as a priest for three years before leaving the priesthood on his own. And the **Rev. John Butler** was sent to Brooklyn, and eventually transferred to New Jersey.

None of the men could be reached for comment. All but one of the seven priests were included on the lists recently given to law enforcement officials in Nassau and Suffolk counties by the Diocese of Rockville Centre.

On April 11, Butler was removed as an associate pastor at St. John Vianney in Colonia, N.J., but only after his alleged victim, Brian Dionne, 50, of Brooklyn, complained to New Jersey church officials when he recently learned Butler still was working.

Dionne says Butler molested him more than 40 years ago, from age 7 to 12, when Dionne was a choirboy at St. Joseph's in Kings Park. Dionne told church officials on Long Island about it soon after the abuse ended, he said, and thought they would remove Butler from places where he had regular access to children.

But they didn't.

"These men were moved only to hide them or get rid of the problem," Dionne said in an interview last week. "It's clear in these cases that the children were the last thought. The first thought: Avoid scandal."

Dionne says he's satisfied that he was finally able to get Butler removed from parish life last week, nearly 40 years after he says he was abused by Butler and told church officials on Long Island.

"I felt some sort of personal obligation to do anything I could to expose him, to protect children from him, so no one else would go through what I went through," Dionne said. "... Now that he's been removed and the church is doing a formal investigation and various authorities and the media are aware of him, I am at peace with it. My job is done."

Fitzgerald's accuser, who has asked not to be identified, also has recently gone to law enforcement officials in Nassau County. He said he first brought allegations against Fitzgerald to the attention of a priest on Long Island in 1984. At that point, he said, he personally advised him that Fitzgerald had fondled him sexually a number of times.

After nothing happened, the victim said he told his parents in June 1985 and together they went to diocese officials, eventually meeting with then-Bishop John McGann. Fitzgerald was then transferred to another Long Island parish, the victim said, and church documents show he moved to Florida soon afterward.

Yesterday, the Diocese of Palm Beach said that when Fitzgerald arrived, they knew nothing of any complaints against him.

In a written statement, the diocese said they were told by diocese officials from Rockville Centre that Fitzgerald "was a priest in good standing, but had allergy problems, which was the reason for his application to the Diocese of Palm Beach."

The diocese said he had his priestly faculties removed two weeks ago because of complaints brought against him in 1992 and 1997 that he had exhibited inappropriate behavior with adults in a parish setting. An earlier complaint that he had molested two teenage brothers the year he arrived in Florida, reported yesterday by the Palm Beach Post, was not noted in the statement and diocese officials were unavailable for comment.

Two of the five Long Island priests transferred to Florida - DeVita and Miraglia - are still working in parishes.

DeVita moved to Florida shortly after complaints were made to the Long Island diocese that he sexually abused a boy at St. Joseph's in Kings Park in 1978, an allegation he has since said publicly was true, though he said the actions of the teenage boy were consensual.

But a year after he got to Florida, he was moved to another state, Michigan, after a "sexual misconduct" complaint was brought against him in Florida by an adult parishioner, according to a report Saturday in the South Florida Sun-Sentinel newspaper. He remains pastor of a parish in New Buffalo, Mich.

Miraglia, who left Long Island in 1982 after a complaint that he asked teens to "disrobe," according to information sent to Nassau law enforcement by the Diocese of Rockville Centre, continues to celebrate Mass at San Isidro Church in Pompano Beach, Fla., according to church officials there.

Duvelsdorf, meanwhile, has retired, and Huneke has left the priesthood.

This week, officials from both the Diocese of Rockville Centre and the Diocese of Palm Beach said that no priest is supposed to be allowed to transfer without a "certificate of aptitude for priestly ministry," a document in which the priest's previous diocese certifies his abilities and behavior.

But a Palm Beach official, Lorraine Sabatella, acknowledged in an interview last week that the diocese had recently identified 10 priests who had been allowed to transfer there without the document being in hand.

She would not say whether any of those priests came from Long Island, but said the diocese would be tightening its procedures in the future to make sure the rules concerning the use of these documents are always followed.

The documents generally ask officials from the transferring diocese to answer a series of questions concerning the priest who's being moved, Novarro, of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, said last week.

Rockville Centre's certificate, for instance, has an eight-point check list of statements that includes:

"He has never been suspended or otherwise canonically disciplined.

He has never behaved in such a way as to indicate that he might engage in sexual behavior inconsistent with priestly celibacy.

He has never behaved in such a way as to indicate that he might deal with minors in an inappropriate manner."

While the policy of the Diocese of Rockville Centre hasn't changed concerning the information passed along to another diocese, Novarro noted that there is now a new sensitivity to the issue.

"Back when people were moved to other dioceses, the psychiatric community believed that people could be rehabilitated and cured and re-inserted into public ministry," she said. "So that did not necessarily, in those times bar them from public ministry. Now, the thinking is we wouldn't do that anymore."

"One of the things we have come to realize in the past few years," Novarro said, "is that by virtue of his collar, a priest is universally accepted by people: adults, children, teenagers. As he moves through the world, where he ministers, lives, shops, wherever he goes, he encounters people that will trust him ... We have to make sure that they [priests who have molested children] are never in a priestly ministry."

The Accused Priests

A look at the seven priests who have been accused of sexual abuse on Long Island and who have since been moved.

MATTHEW FITZGERALD, 61
 Time of Alleged Abuse: 1984
 Where Alleged Abuse Occurred: St. Brigid's, Westbury
 Left Long Island: 1989
 Moved To: Florida
 Status: Lost priestly faculties two weeks ago.

JERRY CHASSE, Age unknown
 Time of Alleged Abuse: 1972-76
 Where Alleged Abuse Occurred: St. Luke's, Brentwood
 Left Long Island: 1977
 Moved To: Montana
 Status: Left priesthood in 1980

SALVATORE MIRAGLIA, 54
 Time of Alleged Abuse: 1982
 Where Alleged Abuse Occurred: Our Holy Redeemer, Freeport
 Left Long Island: 1982

Moved To: Florida
Status:Active priest in Pompano Beach, Fla.

JOHN BUTLER, 72
Time of Alleged Abuse: 1959-64
Where Alleged Abuse Occurred: St. Joseph's, Kings Park
Left Long Island: 1964
Moved To: Brooklyn, then New Jersey
Status: Lost priestly faculties on April 11, 2002

ROBERT HUNEKE, 62
Time of Alleged Abuse: 1971-77
Where Alleged Abuse Occurred: St. Dominic's High School, Oyster Bay
Left Long Island: 1979
Moved To: Florida, then Georgia
Status:Left priesthood in 1989

PETER DUVELSDORF, 71
Time of Alleged Abuse: 1978
Where Alleged Abuse Occurred: St. Rose of Lima, Massapequa
Left Long Island: 1991
Moved To: Florida
Status:Retired in 1998

THOMAS DeVITA, 55
Time of Alleged Abuse: 1978
Where Alleged Abuse Occurred: St. Joseph's, Kings Park
Left Long Island: 1994
Moved To: Florida, then Michigan
Status:Active pastor in New Buffalo, Mich.

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