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Advocacy Group: Norwich Diocese Is Intimidating Sex Abuse Victims

By Brian Wallheimer
Norwich Bulletin
March 30, 2005

Norwich — The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests thinks the Norwich Diocese's approach to allegations that one of its priests sexually abused a boy in the 1970s is making it difficult for other victims to come forward.

In a letter to the Most Rev. Michael Cote, bishop of Norwich, the network said Cote should not have allowed the Rev. R. Thomas McConaghy to address parishioners at Sacred Heart Church after he had been removed as its pastor Feb. 28.

"If someone wants to offer support to an accused priest, they should do it privately. Publicly honoring Father McConaghy essentially says, 'We think you're innocent and your alleged victim is lying,'" Landa Mauriello-Vernon, the state director of SNAP, and David Clohessy, its national director, said.

McConaghy was accused last month of sexually abusing a male between 1973 and 1975 while he was commandant of LaSalle Military Academy in Oakdale, N.Y., before he became a priest.

Mauriello-Vernon said SNAP would like to have a victim from the group address the parishioners about how to support McConaghy so witnesses or other victims don't feel intimidated by outward support from parishioners. She also would like SNAP contact information made available to the diocese.

"If you're going to hear from someone who is accused then you should hear from a victim, too," she said.

Jacqueline Keller, a spokeswoman for the Norwich Diocese, said the diocese has a victim's assistance coordinator and the church is doing everything it can to help potential victims.

"We have all that available in the diocese itself," Keller said.

Keller said McConaghy did not celebrate Mass the day he addressed the congregation.

"He had been accused and relieved of his priestly ministries Feb. 28 and did not have time to say good-bye," Keller said. "That certainly was Father's right as a citizen of this country to talk against an allegation that has not been proven."

Parishioners have started a fund for McConaghy to help defray his legal expenses while he tries to disprove the allegation.