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Priest Accused of Sex Abuse Man Says the Rev. Albert Proud Molested Him Years Ago. Diocese Investigates

By Renee K. Gadoua
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Officials in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse confirmed Sunday they are investigating allegations of sexual abuse involving a local priest.

The diocese learned last week that Ernest Keller of Jacksonville, Fla., accused the Rev. Albert Proud of sexually abusing him in the 1970s, said Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. Costello.

Proud, pastor at Annunciation Church, near Clinton, Oneida County, has been on sabbatical since Easter, Costello said, but he would not say what prompted the sabbatical.

Proud served at St. Patrick Church, Jordan, and served at Christ the King Church, Liverpool, in the 1970s. He could not be reached Sunday.

Keller said Proud molested him in 1973 in a trailer at Selkirk Beach.

"I was a scared little 14-year-old and didn't know any better," he said. "I was an altar boy in his church. He was like God to me."

Keller, a tattoo artist who does prison ministry, said that was the only time Proud molested him. Keller said he has been married five times and spent time in prison for violent-felony convictions.

Last week, Keller sent a letter describing the incident to the Rev. Michael Minehan, diocesan chancellor, and to the Onondaga County District Attorney's Office.

Keller said he wants to meet with Proud, Minehan and Bishop James Moynihan. Keller said Minehan told him he was unable to contact Proud immediately but would call Keller back this week.

"I'm not seeking any money at this point," Keller said. "My personal goal is to meet (Proud), and tell him what has happened to me and to ask for his forgiveness for all the anger I've harbored all these years."

The Proud case brings to five the number of priests the diocese has acknowledged investigating for credible allegations of sexual abuse of a minor. Diocesan officials have confirmed paying settlements in cases involving three of those priests.

Five men have publicly accused a longtime Oswego priest, Monsignor Francis Furfaro, of abusing them.

Diocesan officials would not say if they have asked Furfaro to resign from the priesthood.

"I am in a formal process of gathering information in regardsto allegations against Monsignor Furfaro," Moynihan said. "At the completion of that process, I will make people of the diocese aware of what action I have taken."

The diocese is expected this week to introduce its new lay victim advocate and advisory board. The

change, announced April 29, came as the diocese faced increasing pressure as the national priest sex-abuse scandal unfolded.

Under the current policy, the Syracuse Diocese does not disclose the names of priests accused of sexual abuse. Nor does it require church officials to report cases to law enforcement officials.

When the country's bishops meet June 13 to 15 in Dallas, they are expected to discuss a universal policy for handling sexual-abuse allegations against priests.

That meeting may prompt more changes in the local policy, officials have said.

The Rev. Jon K. Werner, pastor of Christ the King, told parishioners at weekend Masses about the Proud case, the most recent allegation of sexual misconduct in the diocese.

"I told them there was another allegation in the diocese, and it was an allegation against a priest who served here, " Werner said.

"I think people were kind of numb," he said. "It's one of those things that happens somewhere else."

Sunday, after Werner made the announcement, he asked the parish to pray for the accuser and the accused, he said.

Although talking about the issue of priests accused of sexual abuse is difficult, Werner said, he feels obligated to keep his parishioners informed.

"If the press didn't push us on this, we wouldn't deal with this. We have a chance to do it right. It's not going to go away. I see it as our obligation to try to undo the harm that's done."