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Ex-Oswego Priest Ousted Retired in '98 after Allegation

By Mike McAndrew
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Four years ago, the Syracuse Diocese's newspaper, The Catholic Sun, reported that the Rev. Chester Misercola had suffered a heart attack and was resigning for health reasons as pastor of St. John Church.

Misercola, who did have a heart attack in 1997, told his parishioners the same story when he announced his retirement from the pulpit in January 1998.

But a former altar boy said he was told by a key diocesan official that there was another reason. That reason: Bishop James Moynihan had removed Misercola from the Oswego church because the altar boy had accused Misercola of sexually abusing him as a minor. The diocese recently removed Misercola from all active ministry because of a credible allegation made five years ago, shortly before he was pulled from St. John Church.

Former altar boy Sean Lyons, 29, told The Post-Standard that Misercola performed oral sex on him once or twice a week in the church rectory when Lyons was 14 to 18 years old.

Lyons' family belonged to St. John Church and Misercola also taught Lyons at Oswego's Catholic High School, Lyons said.

Misercola frequently gave him money while urging him to keep their sexual contact a secret, Lyons alleged.

"He'd say, "I'll give you \$30 or \$50 to keep quiet," Lyons said.

When he was about 17, Lyons said, he watched Misercola take about \$700 from the Sunday collection at St. John and give it to him.

Misercola photographed and videotaped Lyons in the nude engaged in sexual acts on more than one occasion, Lyons said.

On one instance in 1993, when Lyons was about 20, Misercola paid a prostitute \$400 to let him videotape her having sex with Lyons in the upscale Adolphus Hotel in Dallas, where rooms cost up to \$455 per night, Lyons said. Misercola also paid for their hotel room for two nights, Lyons said.

Lyons claimed Misercola also gave him money to purchase marijuana from a street dealer during a 1994 trip to San Antonio and that the priest was with him when he acquired the drug.

Even after Lyons moved to Tennessee in 1995 and married, Misercola continued to telephone him and send him cards in an attempt to revive their relationship, Lyons said.

Lyons said his wife found out about the relationship by opening a card from Misercola in which the priest wrote he wanted to see Lyons naked.

"Yeah, (the molestation) affected my life. It's pretty embarrassing," said Lyons, who was an Eagle Scout and four-sport athlete in high school.

"When you're young like that ... He more or less started out as somebody I could talk to when I wasn't getting along with my parents. He took advantage of it. And I didn't know any better at the time," Lyons said.

"When you're raised in the Catholic church, you respect priests. You don't know better, basically. That's the best way I can explain it," Lyons said, explaining why he allowed the abuse to continue.

Syracuse diocese spokeswoman Danielle Cummings issued a brief statement Thursday acknowledging that Bishop James M. Moynihan officially removed Misercola from all ministry 1 1/2 weeks ago because of a credible allegation that Misercola sexually abused a minor.

The diocese received the allegation in late 1997, according to the statement.

The tapes

Lyons said he lodged his complaint with the diocese in late 1997 after unsuccessfully trying to recover from Misercola the compromising videotapes and photographs.

Lyons said he sent Misercola a letter in January 1997 demanding the tapes and photos.

Lyons said Misercola did not respond to the letter. Lyons said he called Misercola two weeks later, and tape-recorded their conversation.

Lyons played a copy of the tape for The Post-Standard.

It includes this dialogue:

Lyons: "I was just calling to ask you why you never sent that stuff down here, the tapes from when I was younger, and everything else."

Misercola: "Nothing's here."

Lyons: "Were they destroyed?"

Misercola: "Nothing's here."

Lyons: "If something were to happen to you, they'd go in and find all that."

Misercola: "Nothing's here ... nothing's here ... nothing's here."

Later in the conversation, Lyons said: "I was just calling to see how you're doing, I guess. I just hope everything was destroyed, or whatever."

Misercola: "Oh yeah. Oh yeah."

Lyons: "I don't want nobody hurt."

Misercola: "Oh yeah."

Lyons said he mailed the tape recording to the Rev. J. Robert Yeazel, who was then the diocese's vicar for priests, in November 1997.

Shortly after that, Yeazel called Lyons and told him Bishop Moynihan had removed Misercola from his parish because of the allegation, Lyons said.

Yeazel told him the diocese would pay for counseling if he needed it, Lyons said. He declined the

offer. Lyons said he hasn't heard from the diocese since.

Lyons said he has not received any money from the diocese.

Policies followed

Yeazel declined to comment on the Misercola case. Misercola declined twice this month to comment on the allegations, referring questions to his attorney, Emil Rossi. Rossi said he would not comment on the allegations because the conduct allegedly occurred beyond the state's statute of limitations on sex crimes.

Bishop Moynihan declined last week to be interviewed about Lyons' allegations.

"The diocese does not comment on specific details of allegations as it is difficult to verify the validity of the various claims," the diocese's statement issued Thursday said.

It noted, "The diocese received an allegation in late 1997 against Father Chester Misercola. The diocese of Syracuse followed its policy at that time. Father Misercola was sent for an evaluation at St. Luke's Institute in Maryland. He was admitted for treatment and was discharged in July 1998."

St. Luke Institute is a psychiatric hospital for the clergy.

Since his discharge from St. Luke, the diocese noted that Misercola, who is 64, has resided at the St. Pius X, a home for retired priests at 714 E. Brighton Ave.

The diocese said that in keeping with the provisions of the sexual abuse policy adopted June 14 by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Misercola was officially removed from all ministry 1 1/2 weeks ago.

The national policy calls on bishops to remove priests from ministry for any credible allegations of sexual abuse of a minor in the past, present or future.

Removal from ministry means that Misercola will not be permitted to celebrate Mass publicly, to wear clerical garb or to present himself publicly as a priest, the statement said.

But he will remain a priest.

That doesn't satisfy Lyons.

"I haven't been to church since I left Oswego," Lyons said. "It ruined my whole respect for the church."

Misercola "should go to jail," Lyons said. "He should be tossed from the priesthood."

The Misercola file

The Rev. Chester Misercola served in six parishes in the Syracuse Diocese and on the faculty of the former Oswego Catholic High School. He was removed from ministry last week because of a sexual abuse allegation.

1964: ordained

1964-65: Our Lady of Pompei, Syracuse

1965: Our Lady of the Rosary, New Hartford

1965: Our Lady of Pompei, Syracuse

1965-1968: St. Anthony Church, Utica

1968-1969: St. Anthony Church, Cortland

1969-1970: Immaculate Conception Church, Fulton

1970-1992: On faculty at the former Oswego Catholic High School, renamed Bishop Cunningham High School in 1976

1978-1998: St. John Church, Oswego

1997: Sean Lyons tells the diocese Misercola sexually abused him as a minor

1998: Sent to St. Luke Institute, a psychiatric hospital for clergy

1998: Becomes resident of Pius X home for retired priests, Syracuse

2002: Officially removed from ministry because of sexual abuse allegation

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