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Moynihan Apologizes for Abusive Priests

By Renee K. Gadoua
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Syracuse's bishop got down on his knees at an Oswego church Thursday and apologized for the actions of at least six priests accused of sexually abusing minors.

"I felt I've been remiss up until now," Bishop James Moynihan told about 150 people at St. Mary Church. "I'm very conscious of the fact it's been very difficult up here. If I didn't come sooner, it was my fault."

The bishop's apology came at a "A Time of Healing," a solemn prayer service and informal reception at the church at 107 W. Seventh St. Moynihan's comments were his most public and direct ones about local priests accused of sexual abuse since the scandal began about two years ago.

Since then, diocesan officials have confirmed that the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse permanently removed eight priests from ministry because of credible allegations of sexual abuse of minors. The diocese is investigating allegations against two other priests named in recent lawsuits. Officials also confirmed that the diocese paid two Oswego families a total of \$475,000 to settle lawsuits that accused a 10th priest, the former Rev. Daniel Casey, of molesting three boys in the 1980s. Casey died in 2000.

Consistent with his policy, Moynihan did not name any of the accused priests Thursday.

He didn't have to, said the Rev. Stephen Wirkes, pastor of Immaculate Conception Church, Fulton, and one of the priests who suggested the healing service.

"Everybody in Oswego knows those priests because they taught their children," he said.

Among the accused are two prominent former Oswego priests, Monsignor Francis J. Furfaro and the Rev. Chester Misercola. Both face multimillion-dollar lawsuits that accuse them of sexually abusing minors.

"People of this region have been harmed and their faith has been sorely tested by the sins of priests and bishops," Moynihan said during the prayer service. "I stand before you tonight to tell you I repent for the sins that have been committed and I repent for the harm that has been done."

About half of the 30-minute service consisted of silent prayer. At one point, Moynihan sat, hands folded in front of his mouth, as he prayed.

At least 10 clergy, including Bishop Thomas Costello, who sat with the congregation, attended the service. Several diocesan officials, including Teresa Secreti, the victim assistance coordinator, also attended.

As Moynihan read from a prepared statement, people listened carefully, their faces serious. Several people cried quietly, and two women at the back of the church embraced each other at the end of the service.

"I ask that somehow, with God's help, we might be able to begin the process of healing and

reconciliation," Moynihan said.

That was exactly what the Syracuse Diocese's Northern Region — which includes most Oswego County parishes needed to hear, Wirkes said.

Closing and merging of parishes, closing of Catholic schools, and personnel changes have also troubled Oswego County Catholics, he said.

In the last five years, the structure of at least eight Oswego County parishes changed as the Syracuse Diocese implemented a reconfiguration process to address a clergy shortage and demographic changes. Changes include three sets of parishes that merged to form one parish.

Last month, Wirkes was named pastor of Immaculate Conception Church. His appointment angered some parishioners, who questioned why the bishop did not renew the appointment of the Rev. Carlo Stirpe, who had served as pastor there for six years and had requested a second, six-year term.

Wirkes' reassignment also left St. Mary, Mexico, and St. Anne, Parish, without a pastor. That added to the sense the bishop was ignoring the area, several people said.

Moynihan's presence in Oswego, and his apology, will help the morale of Catholic laypeople and clergy, said Wirkes, who called the service "a watershed moment."

Moynihan's candor surprised him, he said.

"It was right out there," he said. "He came right to the eye of the storm. The anger that everyone has felt has been suppressed and not dealt with."

Dawn Janey, a parishioner of St. Mary, agreed the bishop's words were an important step.

"It's great," said Janey, who attended the service with her 8- and 7-year-old sons. "It needed to be done. I'm hoping it will help."

Marie Allen of St. Stephen Church, Phoenix, said she had been disheartened to hear allegations against a priest she had known as a child. "I prayed for the victims and the perpetrators," she said. "The people from the parishes really needed to hear that from the bishop."