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New Charges of Past Abuse in Diocese Also: Utica Pastor Transferred Because of 1990 Abuse Incident

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Local Catholic officials are investigating "a few" new allegations of sexual abuse and have reassigned one diocesan priest because of a 1990 incident of sexual abuse, officials said Wednesday.

The Rev. Donald J. Hebert was removed last week as pastor of St. Joseph/St. Patrick Church, Utica, and reassigned to an administrative position because he sexually abused a teen-age boy, said Danielle Cummings, communications director for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse.

"We thought it was best he not remain in a parish," Cummings said, adding the move was not related to new allegations. "We felt it would be in the best interest of both parties. We're sensitive to what parishioners' and the public's expectations are."

Hebert, 55, declined March 28 to answer questions about the 1990 sexual abuse allegations or about his impending transfer to a retirement home for priests in Utica.

"I'm here for right now," Hebert said before hanging up on a reporter.

Diocesan officials refuse to say how many new allegations have emerged since Bishop James Moynihan issued a letter Feb. 23-24 assuring Catholics he will not tolerate sexual abuse by priests. The letter read at all parishes in the seven-county diocese urged people "harmed by the church's ministers" to contact diocesan officials.

Diocesan officials would not reveal how many priests have been accused of sexual abuse in the past 25 years. Nor would they reveal how many priests have been reassigned due to allegations or how much the diocese has paid in settlements involving sexual abuse allegations.

Under pressure from the public and from law enforcement officials since the priest sex-abuse scandal emerged in January, some dioceses across the country have reviewed personnel files, dismissed priests and provided names of the accused to legal authorities.

Last week, the Archdiocese of New York gave the Manhattan district attorney a list of about three dozen priests accused of sexual abuse of minors dating back 35 to 40 years. Monday, the New York diocese removed six priests from active duty because of past allegations.

In the Syracuse diocese, officials would say only that they regularly review personnel files and that the bishop's policy is to not provide the name or number of priests involved in allegations of sex abuse to law enforcement officials or to the public.

"The bishop has made that decision primarily because these cases are extremely sensitive," Cummings said. "He does not think that's prudent, and that's the policy we're going to follow."

The diocese is reviewing its policy on priest misconduct and may release a revised policy as soon as Friday, Cummings said.

Officials have said the revised policy may include reporting cases to civil authorities. Some state

legislators are proposing changes to require church representatives become mandatory reporters of abuse.

"We have received a few allegations since the letter was read," Cummings said. "They are few in number. And they are of matters occurring decades ago."

She said the cases involve minors.

She said diocese officials have confronted priests with the new allegations and sent them outside the diocese for evaluation and treatment.

The diocese has received no allegation of sexual misconduct occurring in the past 10 years between a priest and a minor, Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. Costello said.

No other sexual abuse allegations against Hebert were raised before or after the 1990 incident, Costello said.

A 14-year-old boy told Syracuse police in 1990 Hebert, then pastor at Most Holy Rosary Church, Syracuse, fondled him on a camping trip in Parish, Oswego County.

Syracuse police did not charge Hebert. The victim's family told police it did not want him prosecuted because he apologized to the family.

"Nobody (else) ever came forward, and we certainly didn't put out a notice in the Sunday bulletin asking, "Is there anyone else?"" Costello said.

Costello said professionals who treated Hebert at St. Luke Institute in Maryland indicated returning Hebert to parish work was not a risk.

Hebert served as chaplain at St. Luke's Hospital, New Hartford, from 1991 to 1996. In 1997, he was named pastor at St. Joseph/St. Patrick, Utica.

As a parish priest, Hebert routinely had unrestricted access to children in his Utica parish.

Diocesan officials did not tell parishioners at the Utica church of Hebert's sex offense. Should they have?

"That's a good question. I don't know," Costello said.