

BishopAccountability.org

Church Looks to Kick out 16 Priests

Vatican Has Speeded up Process for Severing Ties with Dioceses

By Renee K. Gadoua
Post-Standard [Syracuse NY]
January 8, 2004

Sixteen Syracuse priests could learn within six months if their sexual misconduct means the end of their clerical careers.

"Petitions will be going to the Holy See (the Vatican) for all 16," Bishop James Moynihan said this week.

In response to the American clergy sexual abuse scandal, Pope John Paul II last year simplified the process for laicization, which formalizes a priest's return to the status of layperson and severs his relationship with his diocese.

Previously, only the pope had the power to remove offenders from the priesthood. It's an unusual practice; the Syracuse Diocese has reported two priests were laicized in the last 50 years.

The number and speed in which the requests are being processed are unprecedented, experts say.

The Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, which oversees clerical abuse cases worldwide for the Vatican, now can remove most offenders without a church trial.

As required by a national policy bishops approved in 2002, Moynihan removed the priests from permanent ministry because of credible allegations of sexual abuse. Those priests cannot work, dress, or identify themselves as priests. The final church punishment would be laicization.

A priest can voluntarily request laicization, or his bishop can make the request. In some cases, the accused priests may face a church trial, heard by canon law experts outside the diocese.

Diocesan officials would not say how many of the 16 - whom they refuse to name - are voluntarily seeking laicization or if any are resisting the process.

At least three local priests - Monsignors Francis Furfaro and H. Charles Sewall and the Rev. William Lorenz - have publicly confirmed they sexually abused minors. A \$22.5 million lawsuit accuses Furfaro of molesting seven boys. Three \$20 million lawsuits accuse Sewall of abusing three boys.

Furfaro has said he would not voluntarily resign from the priesthood. Wednesday, he hung up on a reporter telephoning him for comment on his current status.

Officials will not say if Sewall and Lorenz still live in the area.

Although Syracuse's bishops Moynihan and Thomas Costello voted with the overwhelming majority of U.S. bishops to approve the policy on sexual abuse, both questioned the judicial process and raised questions about the rights of accused priests. Both have said the diocese maintains a financial responsibility for its priests, even those accused of abuse.

If the Vatican approves laicization for a priest who is at retirement age, he will continue to receive retirement benefits from the diocese, said the Rev. Michael Minehan, Syracuse's chancellor and a

canon lawyer.

"If the priest is under the retirement age, they will get 18 months support package to transition to a new career," he said.

He would not say how many of the accused priests are retired.

Some church officials have said the 2002 rules make it difficult to address incidents alleged to have occurred years ago.

A national audit released Tuesday found that most dioceses - including Syracuse and Rochester - have complied with mandatory policies to prevent abuse and deal harshly with reports of sexual abuse. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops intends to repeat the audit each year.

Minehan said the diocese is committed to reporting any current or new cases of sexual abuse to law enforcement.

"Everyone is encouraged to go to civil authorities," he said. "We will take it to them if it is a minor."

He said the national audit serves as a turning point in the two-year scandal that has tested the trust and faith of many Catholics.

"It's been a difficult two years for everybody in the church, but it's leading us to a much better future," he said.

Any original material on these pages is copyright © BishopAccountability.org 2004. Reproduce freely with attribution.