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Lawsuit Accuses Monsignor Furfaro

It Seeks \$22 Million, Alleging Sexual Abuse and Accusing Diocese of Cover-Up

By Jim O'Hara and Renee K. Gadoua
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A \$22.5 million lawsuit accuses a popular, longtime priest from Oswego of sexually molesting seven men or boys.

The lawsuit involving Monsignor Francis J. Furfaro brings to at least 10 the number of lawsuits alleging sexual abuse by clergy filed against the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse since the sexual abuse scandal began 18 months ago.

Greenberg Traurig of New York filed the suit after two lawyers with the firm met in October with several men who said Furfaro had molested them when they were minors. In September, lawyers with Greenberg Traurig negotiated a \$10 million legal settlement with dozens of victims of former priest and convicted pedophile John J. Geoghan of the Boston Diocese.

Five men previously accused Furfaro of abusing them as children. It's unclear whether any of those men are a part of the lawsuit. A copy of the lawsuit released by the court has the victims' names removed.

The diocese paid about \$75,000 in 1999 to a man who accused Furfaro of sexually abusing him as a teen.

Furfaro, 85, retired in 1991. He is among eight priests the Syracuse Diocese has confirmed that it permanently removed from ministry because of credible allegations of sexual abuse of minors.

The others are Monsignors H. Charles Sewall and John M. Zeder, and the Revs. James Hayes, Donald Hebert, William Lorenz, Chester Misercola, and Albert Proud.

The new suit, filed Monday in the Onondaga County Clerk's Office, says all the incidents occurred after church officials knew Furfaro was "a dangerous sexual abuser who had molested other boys and young men."

The allegations date to 1947 and 1948, when Furfaro taught religious instruction classes at Our Lady of Pompei, Syracuse.

The lawsuit includes allegations involving seven victims, five of whom were minors at the times of the alleged incidents. Two of the victims claim they were molested after being hypnotized by Furfaro during counseling sessions.

The lawsuit charges Furfaro molested young boys at Our Lady of Pompei and then described the behavior as a game. It alleges the church responded to complaints from several parents by transferring Furfaro to St. Joseph Church, Oswego, with no warning to people there of the accusations.

The complaint charges the molesting continued for 40 years while Furfaro served as a priest in Oswego. The church directly caused the abuse because it covered up what it knew about Furfaro, the suit says.

"The Diocese supported and promoted reverence of Father Furfaro, assisting him in building his reputation by holding him out as parish leader," the lawsuit charges.

The lawsuit seeks at least \$8.75 million to compensate the seven victims for any damages they have suffered. It seeks at least \$5 million to establish a fund for future medical and counseling expenses. It

also seeks at least \$8.75 million in punitive damages.

Danielle Cummings, communications director for the diocese, referred questions to Paul Hanrahan, a lawyer with Hancock & Estabrook, the firm that represents the diocese.

Hanrahan said Thursday neither he nor the diocese had been served with the lawsuit.

He said he received a letter dated April 9 from Kenneth A. Lapatine of Greenberg Traurig "with a portion of the complaint he intends to file."

Hanrahan said he had not responded to the letter.

He would not speak about specifics of any lawsuit against the diocese.

"The lawsuits are really subject, all of them, to the statute of limitations," he said. "That's the key."

Emil Rossi, who represents Furfaro, said Thursday he was unaware of the lawsuit against his client. He and Furfaro have denied the allegations in the past.

A woman who answered the phone at Furfaro's Fairmount residence Thursday said he was not home.

Furfaro was one of Oswego's most prominent and popular residents for more than 40 years while serving at St. Joseph Church, 178 W. Second St.

The lawsuit contends Furfaro used his reputation and position in the church to manipulate young men and boys.

"Parishioners reposed their trust and confidence in Father Furfaro because the Diocese encouraged this, and his position as parish priest served as a platform for him for leadership roles in the larger community, which further promoted his authority," the suit says.

Furfaro established part of the rectory as a "hang-out" for boys and provided alcohol to some of them, according to the suit.

"Father Furfaro abused scores of boys and young men during his approximately 40 years as an active priest in the Diocese, and at no time during those 40 years did either church or the Diocese with which he was associated warn parishioners that there was a known danger in their midst," the lawsuit charges.

The lawsuit charges that Furfaro never would have been allowed individual contact with any of the victims had the diocese disclosed the nature of his alleged history. The victims or the parents of the minor victims would have sought guidance in another parish had the truth about Furfaro been known, the complaint says.

"As a result, the Diocese decided to conceal the truth to serve its own best interests over those of its parishioners," the complaint charges.