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Lawsuit: Two Priests Abused Teen

Woman Sues Diocese, Saying Incidents Occurred 25 Years Ago in Cortland

By Mike McAndrew
Post-Standard (Syracuse, NY)
March 21, 2003

A Central New York woman claimed Thursday that two Catholic priests sexually abused her in separate incidents when she was a teenage member of their Cortland church and working for them as a maid.

In a lawsuit against the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse, the woman, identified only as Jane Doe, alleged Monsignor John M. Zeder raped her between 1978 and 1981 and that the Rev. Thomas F. Keating sexually abused her in 1982 after she told Keating about Zeder's conduct.

The incidents allegedly occurred while Zeder and Keating were serving as parish priests at St. Mary's Church in Cortland, said the woman's lawyer, John Aretakis, of New York City.

The diocese, Bishop James Moynihan, Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Costello and the two priests were accused in the lawsuit of violating the federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act by conspiring to conceal criminal sexual conduct by the priests.

The woman alleged she informed Moynihan in March 2002 that Zeder had raped her.

According to Aretakis, the Rev. Michael Minehan, chancellor of the Syracuse Diocese, told the woman last year that Moynihan had barred Zeder from all public ministry after determining her allegations against him were credible.

Diocese spokeswoman Danielle Cummings declined to say if Zeder was removed from ministry.

Keating, 63, who is the pastor at Most Holy Rosary Church in Maine, in Broome County, said Wednesday he knew nothing of the allegations.

"I have no knowledge of any such thing. I know nothing about it," said Keating, who was at St. Mary's from 1982 to 1993.

The lawsuit alleges that in a March 2002 phone call with the woman, Keating admitted she told him in 1982 that Zeder had raped her. During the conversation, Keating tried to talk her out of reporting the sexual abuse to the diocese, the lawsuit alleges.

Zeder, 77, who is retired, served as pastor of St. Mary's from 1978 to 1981.

Zeder did not respond Thursday to a request for an interview left for him at St. Pius X, a home for retired priests at 714 E. Brighton Ave. in Syracuse.

The lawsuit also accused Zeder of threatening to put the girl in a mental institution if she told anyone about their sexual contact and of stalking her years afterward.

The woman alleged she suffered a nervous breakdown after Zeder called her at her college dormitory and told her he would visit her there. In the summer of 2001, Zeder called the woman and asked her to meet him for lunch, the lawsuit alleges.

Cummings said no other sexual abuse lawsuits have been filed against Zeder or Keating.

She said she did not know if the lawsuit will trigger any change in Keating's status as a parish priest at Most Holy Rosary in Broome County.

"We haven't been officially served" with the lawsuit, Cummings said. "We have no knowledge of this action against the diocese. So it is premature to comment until we receive information that this is an action against the diocese."

Aretakis, who has filed a handful of sexual abuse lawsuits against priests in the dioceses of Albany and Rochester, declined to identify his client in the Syracuse Diocese case. He said she is about 40 years old, is married and lives in the Syracuse area.

Aretakis said the woman did not tell police about the sexual abuse when it occurred. He said the woman's husband contacted the state attorney general's office and a police agency in 2002. The woman's husband was advised that the statute of limitations had expired and police could not file criminal charges in connection with the allegations, Aretakis said.

Before they hired Aretakis, the woman and her husband met with Moynihan and other Syracuse Diocese officials last spring, Aretakis said.

He said the woman asked diocesan officials to remove Zeder from ministry, publicly disclose Zeder's sexual abuse and investigate if Zeder had sexual contact with any other minors. The woman also asked the diocese to require Zeder to publicly apologize to her.

The woman decided to sue the diocese because it failed to meet most of her requests, he said.

Thursday, the Rev. John Fenlon, who served with Keating at St. Mary's Church before succeeding him as parish priest, said he was surprised by the allegations against Keating and Zeder.

Fenlon said he didn't know whether he would talk about the lawsuit Sunday at St. Mary's, which has about 4,000 members.

"I really don't know," Fenlon said. "This comes as quite a surprise."

Monsignor John Zeder

Ordained in 1954, Monsignor John Zeder served in some of the following capacities in recent decades:

St. Ann's Church, Parish, 1994-1998

President and rector at Mater Dei Institute, Spokane, Wash., 1988-1991

St. Malachy Church, Sherburne, 1982-1987

St. Mary's Church, Cortland, 1979-1982

St. James Mission Society, Ecuador, South America, 1975-1978

Source: The Official Catholic Directory

Rev. Thomas F. Keating

Ordained in 1966, the Rev. Thomas Keating served in some of the following capacities in recent decades:

Most Holy Rosary Church, Maine, Broome County, 1993-present

St. Mary's Church, Cortland, 1982-1993

Our Lady of Angels Church, Endwell, 1980

St. James Church, Johnson City, 1975-1978

Source: The Official Catholic Directory

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