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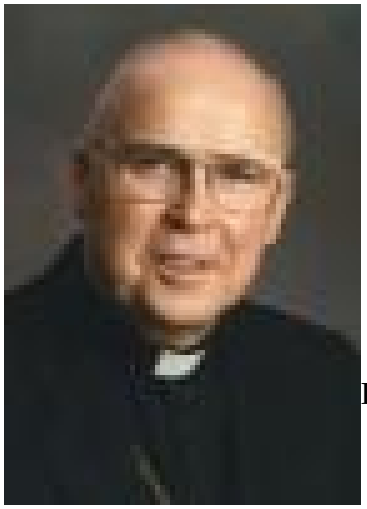
Diocesan board finds retired Iowa bishop abused minors

Barb Arland-Fye Catholic News Service | Nov. 6, 2008



DAVENPORT, Iowa ? Davenport's diocesan review board has found credible accusations that retired Bishop Lawrence D. Soens of Sioux City, Iowa, sexually abused minors when he served here as a priest from 1950 to 1983.

Deacon David Montgomery, diocesan director of communication, said information about Soens? case had been sent to the Vatican. Pope Benedict XVI will determine what action to take, if any.

The retired bishop, 82, was accused of sex abuse by 31 male minors, the Davenport diocese reported, and the review board found ?certain allegations? to be credible. The board ?did not review all of the allegations against him because some claimants did not want their claims reviewed by the board,? the report added.

The Nov. 3 announcement brought to 26 the number of priests in the Davenport diocese against whom credible allegations of sexual abuse have been made.

The board exonerated Msgr. Drake Shafer, former vicar general of the diocese, more than five years after he took a leave of absence because of an allegation of sexual abuse of a minor. Shafer will return to active ministry.

"After all this time I cannot say how happy I am to have the fact that I did not sexually abuse anyone be recognized and affirmed," he told *The Catholic Messenger*, Davenport diocesan newspaper. "This has been a long five and a half years in which I have sought to be as forthcoming and cooperative as I could."

Davenport Bishop Martin J. Amos announced Nov. 3 that the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had concurred with the finding of an ecclesiastical court this summer that the 61-year-old Msgr. Shafer, a priest of the diocese for 35 years, was not guilty of sexual abuse.

The diocesan review board had found credible accusations that Soens of Sioux City, Iowa, had sexually abused minors.The review board found "certain allegations" to be credible, but it "did not review all of the allegations against him because some claimants did not want their claims reviewed by the board," the report added.

Also found credible were allegations of sexual abuse of minors by one retired, one laicized and one deceased priest. Accusations against another priest who died in 1989 were judged not credible because they failed to reach the standard of "clear and convincing evidence" required in the cases of those who cannot defend themselves.

The Nov. 3 announcement brought to 26 the number of priests in the Davenport Diocese against whom credible allegations of sexual abuse have been made. The diocese, which filed for bankruptcy in 2006, agreed to pay $37 million to 156 victims of clergy sex abuse in late 2007; another $10.5 million settlement had been announced earlier.

Bishop Amos said in a statement that he was "pleased the Holy See has brought this case to a conclusion" and welcomed Msgr. Shafer "back into ministry after his long absence." He said he would "review assignment options with Msgr. Shafer and the Priest Personnel Board in the near future."

In compliance with the U.S. bishops' "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," the diocese is making every attempt to ensure that Msgr. Shafer's good reputation is restored.

In the minds of many, Shafer was a "shining light with the capacity for greater leadership in the church," said Ed Rogalski, past president of St. Ambrose University where Shafer once served as a vice president. The diocese has the opportunity to put his talents to use again. "He has much to offer the faithful," Rogalski added.

"Now that he's been exonerated, there ought to be a celebration and we ought to focus on the positive," said longtime friend Deb Bly of Prince of Peace Parish in Clinton. "He's a wonderful priest. Now he can get back to what his calling is."

Shafer said he is open to whatever the bishop and his advisers decide.

"I believe I was and am a good priest who has many gifts and talents that are God-given that I would like to share with the diocese and with the people of God," he said. "Throughout my priesthood I've been in pastoral, academic and campus ministry and in administration. I'm open to any of those things."

Shafer said he himself was a victim of clergy sexual abuse as a child while serving as an altar server and sacristan at St. Alphonsus Parish in Davenport where a religious order priest, now deceased, abused him repeatedly. Shafer also is one of the creditors in the Diocese of Davenport's recently settled bankruptcy case as a result of that abuse.

"I can identify with the many, many victims of clergy sexual abuse," he said. "I believe it is a terrible crime that existed within the church and that the church was morally negligent in not correcting and confronting the issue openly and honestly when it occurred."

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