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Priest returned medal after admitting abuse

Simon Caldwell Catholic News Service | Jun. 22, 2011

LONDON -- A popular Catholic priest returned a prestigious award to Queen Elizabeth II after he admitted sexually abusing boys at a school in Africa more than 40 years ago.

Father Christopher "Kit" Cunningham sent back his Member of the British Empire medal to Buckingham Palace in July 2010.

He received the award from the queen during a ceremony at the palace in 1998, dressed in a top hat and tails, for his work with homeless people.

The priest, who died Dec. 12 at age 79, offered no explanation to the palace for returning the medal and asked only that there would be no publicity.

But the reason for his action was disclosed June 21 in a British Broadcasting Corp. documentary titled "Abused: Breaking the Silence."

The film revealed Father Cunningham to be one of four Rosminian priests accused of abusing boys of British families who were attending St. Michael's School in Soni, Tanzania, in the 1960s.

The film was made when, after decades of living as far afield as South Africa, Australia, England, the United States and Canada, former students, now in their 50s and 60s, contacted one another over the Internet and exchanged stories about the abuse they suffered.

In 2009, a group eventually decided to contact Father David Myers, the Rosminian provincial in England and Wales, to tell him about the abuse and he accepted their testimonies.

Cunningham later confessed to the abuse in a letter to John Poppleton, a victim, and apologized for his actions. He said the abuse had been on his conscience for some 40 years, adding: "What can I do other than express my remorse and beg you to forgive me?"

Victims also said Father Cunningham was aware of abuse perpetrated by other priests at the school but actively covered it up.

He threatened one victim, Donald McFarlane, who wanted to complain about abuse by Father William Jackson, with the words: "Woe betide young man if you ever say anything about this again."

It was in a letter to McFarlane, in which he admitted to covering up abuse and which was shown by the BBC, that Father Cunningham wrote: "After much reflection I have decided to return my MBE (Member of the British Empire medal)."

Father Myers declined to talk to the BBC.

However, in a statement posted on the Rosminian website, Father Myers apologized to the abuse victims.

"Such abuse was a grievous breach of trust to them and to their families. We are appalled by what was done to them," the statement said.

"I and all my brethren are deeply shocked at what has happened and acknowledge our inadequate response," Father Myers said. "We are committed to the pastoral care and support of those who have suffered abuse and to the procedures laid down by the National Catholic Safeguarding Commission."

In 1980, Cunningham became parish priest of St. Etheldreda Church, a short walk from Fleet Street, then the home of the national press, where he made many friends.

He enjoyed a high profile in the media for his work with homeless people. He edited the Westminster Record, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Westminster. When he died, national newspapers carried glowing obituaries.

Another priest against whom allegations of abuse were made was Father Bernard Collins, who was sent to Africa from Grace Dieu School in Leicestershire, England, after Donald MacFaul, then 11, complained that he had repeatedly sexually molested him.

MacFaul told the BBC that Collins also often resorted to violent punishments that exceeded accepted practices of the time, including shooting pupils with an air pistol.

Under pressure from Father Myers, Collins admitted obtaining sexual gratification by acts of sadism, but when confronted by one of his victims, Rory Johnston, he denied the accusations.

"I never committed any sexual act with whatsoever with any male or females," said Collins, now in his 90s, in the BBC film.

The fourth abusive priest named by the former students was Father Douglas Rayner.

A total of 22 former pupils are seeking compensation from the Rosminians, but the order is defending the claims.

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