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Episcopal bishop defends record in abuse case

Lauren Markoe Religion News Service | Jul. 7, 2011

WASHINGTON -- The Episcopal Church is rejecting charges that its top leader, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, mishandled the ordination of a former priest who is now accused of sexual abuse.

Jefferts Schori has remained silent on the matter, which surfaced after an alleged victim filed suit last month against a Benedictine monastery in Missouri where the priest, the Rev. Bede Parry, once lived.

Parry, a former Catholic monk, was ordained as an Episcopal priest in Nevada in 2004, when Jefferts Schori was the local bishop before her 2006 election as presiding bishop.

Her successor in Nevada, Bishop Dan Edwards, said Tuesday (July 5) that a thorough review of church records shows that Jefferts Schori "handled the situation perfectly appropriately."

"The spin on this, that Bishop Katharine failed to follow the rules to protect children, is highly ironic," said Edwards, who noted that the Diocese of Nevada has wrestled with problems of clergy misconduct. "She has done more to clean up this diocese than anybody."

While the Roman Catholic Church has weathered years of allegations from victims and lawyers of mishandling abuse cases, the issue has not similarly roiled the 2.4 million-member Episcopal Church, or Jefferts Schori's leadership.

Edwards said the process that accepted Parry as an Episcopal priest was careful and long, stretching from 2002 until 2004. Parry told church leaders, including Jefferts Schori, that in 1987 he had inappropriately touched an adolescent in Missouri, and that the police had been called but charges had not been filed. He also disclosed that he had gone to counseling.

Episcopal leaders found that there had been no other incidents involving Parry, and subjected Parry to their own, routine psychological testing, Edwards said. They concluded that he did not fit the profile of a pedophile.

"Nonetheless, Bishop Katharine directed that Bede Parry would not be allowed to have contact with minors in the ministry," Edwards told Religion News Service. "She gave that directive to people who oversaw him in the ministry."

A statement issued by the Nevada diocese after the lawsuit was filed raised more questions than it answered, according to victims' advocates, and said nothing of Jefferts Schori's role in the matter.

"Parishioners deserve the whole truth about why (she) kept silent about Parry's crimes and why she ordained him," said David Clohessy, national director the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP).

"Many church officials, not just Catholic bishops, fixate on self-preservation rather than on preventing abuse and healing victims and exposing the truth," he said.

Requests for comment from Episcopal Church headquarters in New York were referred to the Nevada diocese, which Bishop Paul Marshall of Bethlehem, Pa., called "obfuscation" and a failure of leadership.

"On paper, we are a one-strike church, but in reality, too many people have walked," Marshall wrote on Episcopal Cafe, an independent liberal-leaning website.

The lawsuit does not name Parry, the Episcopal Church or the Diocese of Nevada but instead targets the Conception Abbey, a Roman Catholic monastery and seminary in northwestern Missouri where the alleged abuse occurred.

The civil suit also contends that the results of psychological testing in 2000 showed that Parry was a serial abuser who was likely to offend again, and that this information was shared with the Episcopal Church prior to his ordination.

"I'm really skeptical that the report ever existed. But if it did, we've never seen it," said Edwards.

After the suit was filed last month, Parry resigned from the priesthood, Edwards said. He had worked as an organist at All Saints' Church in Las Vegas and his pastoral care mostly involved senior citizens.

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