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Bishop who resigned because of sex abuse dies

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Bishop Anthony J. O'Connell, whose admission of inappropriate conduct with high school seminarians decades ago led to his resignation as head of the Palm Beach, Fla., diocese in 2002, died May 4 at Mepkin Abbey in Moncks Corner, S.C.

The Irish-born bishop had lived under supervision at the abbey since his resignation. His funeral Mass was May 7, also at the abbey.

O'Connell died after a long illness, less than a week before his 74th birthday.

A priest of the Jefferson City, Mo., diocese, he had been bishop of Knoxville, Tenn., from its founding in 1988 until he was appointed bishop of Palm Beach in November 1998.

At the time of his resignation, he publicly acknowledged inappropriate conduct with minors while he was on staff at St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary, the Jefferson City diocesan high school seminary in Hannibal. He was spiritual director there in 1968-70 and rector from 1970 to 1988.

"It always hung over me," he said at the March 8, 2002, news conference announcing his resignation. "I don't think I have ever preached without being conscious [of it]. I certainly have been powerfully motivated in my preaching."

After his resignation, he was able to keep his title, although he could not wear clerical attire or perform public ministry.

The Jefferson City diocese paid $125,000 in a settlement to a former seminarian in 1996. Two other ex-seminarians received out-of-court settlements in cases involving O'Connell in 2004.

O'Connell's resignation came less than two months after the clergy sexual abuse scandal erupted in the Boston archdiocese. But he was the second Palm Beach bishop to resign over sex abuse allegations. In June 1998, Bishop J. Keith Symons admitted to molesting five altar boys during the 1970s and resigned.

O'Connell said that when he was asked in November 1998 to replace Symons, he didn't tell anyone that he, too, had been accused of sexual misconduct -- a decision he said he came to regret.

Bishop James V. Johnston of the Springfield-Cape Girardeau, Mo., diocese was one of the first priests for the Knoxville diocese that O'Connell ordained. In 1996, he was named chancellor while O'Connell was bishop.

?I knew Bishop O?Connell for 10 years while he served as the first bishop of Knoxville," Johnston said in a statement. "He brought many gifts to this time of service. After he departed, news emerged from his past of which I was unaware. I look at his life in light of both realities, and I pray now for his soul.?

After O'Connell's resignation, some area Catholics, including Susan Vance, sought to have O'Connell's photo

removed from a local high school, his name removed from a family life center and a bust of him removed from the chancery.

"Bishop Anthony O'Connell still remains a larger-than-life figure to Catholics in East Tennessee, due to concerted efforts by the clergy to rehabilitate his image in the Catholic diocese of Knoxville," said Vance, a cofounder of the Tennessee chapter of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

"Ten years after admitting abuse and moving to a life of security and peace at Mepkin Abbey, South Carolina, O'Connell eludes civil justice and remains a Catholic priest to his dying day. He was never defrocked despite admission of crimes that the Catholic church says it abhors. Victims must settle for the justice that O'Connell avoided on earth awaiting him before his Creator."

"This is a case which points out that priests seem to be treated much more severely by the Congregation [for the Doctrine] of the Faith in regard to defrocking than bishops," she said.

Born May 10, 1938, in Lisheen, Ballynacally, not far from Shannon Airport, O'Connell studied at Mount St. Joseph College in Cork and at Mungret College, a Jesuit institution in Limerick.

After immigrating to the United States in 1959, he entered what is now Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in St. Louis. He also studied physics and chemistry at Quincy College in Illinois and at the University of Missouri, Columbia. He was ordained a priest of the Jefferson City diocese in 1963.

His first assignment was professor and director of students at St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary. He also was diocesan director of vocations from 1969 to 1988, and was a member of the diocese's personnel commission and president of its Presbyteral Council.

In 1988, he was appointed first bishop of the newly created Knoxville Diocese. Throughout his tenure there, he served on the Catholic Committee of Appalachia and the Catholic Committee of the South, and developed an affinity for driving around the predominantly rural diocese while listening to classical and Celtic music.

With other bishops and religious leaders in the region, he signed a 1989 statement supporting a United Mine Workers strike against the Pittston Coal Co. In 1991, he urged patience by the U.S. government before the Gulf War.

He was among the 25 Appalachian bishops and archbishops who signed "At Home in the Web of Life," a 1995 pastoral message on the human and ecological crisis confronting the people of Appalachia.

At the national level he served on the bishops' Committee on Home Missions and on the board of Catholic Relief Services. He was part of CRS delegations that visited Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1996 and Kosovo in 1998.

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