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Myers under fire for Peoria record

Brian Roewe | Aug. 26, 2013

Newark, N.J., Archbishop John J. Myers, already under fire for the lax supervision of a priest who was under court order not to minister to youth, faces new questions concerning his handling of clergy sex abuse allegations while he was bishop in Peoria, Ill., more than a decade ago.

Attorneys for abuse victim Andrew Ward announced Aug. 13 that they had reached an agreement with the Peoria diocese over a lawsuit accusing Msgr. Thomas Maloney of molesting Ward when he was a boy in the mid-1990s. The diocese settled the suit for $1.35 million. Maloney died in 2009 at age 73.

Records released as part of the agreement show the Peoria diocese received complaints about Maloney's inappropriate conduct with children in 1995 and 1999, but that in 2000 Myers wrote to a family that the diocese had no record of complaints against Maloney.

That same year, Myers nominated Maloney for the honorific "monsignor."

In a 2010 deposition, also unsealed as part of the settlement, Myers said he never had any suspicions of sexual abuse on Maloney's part, but acknowledged "there may have been things that got by me" and describes the administration of diocesan records in his time in Peoria as a "loose system."

Now archbishop of Newark, Myers served as bishop of Peoria from January 1990 through October 2001, and before that served the diocese as its chancellor, vicar general and coadjutor.

This spring, a New Jersey newspaper reported that a Newark priest, Fr. Michael Fugee, had violated a court agreement by interacting with children through youth retreats and trips throughout the state. In July 2007, Fugee, the local district attorney and the Newark archdiocese had signed a memorandum of understanding restricting the priest's ministry, related to charges against him for separate instances in 1999 and 2000 in which he had inappropriate contact with a 14-year-old boy.

Myers had assigned Fugee to positions away from minors, and the priest was supposed to be under supervision. After the news accounts ran, Fugee resigned from public ministry and later was arrested. The archdiocese's vicar general then resigned his post.

The Fugee case led local media outlets and politicians to call for Myers' resignation. Joanne Ward, the Peoria victim's mother, joined the chorus calling for discipline.

"I don't want the resignation. I want Bishop Myers to go to jail as a predator because he was the one who played the chess game in allowing predators to be placed in our children's school," she said at a news conference in Newark, according to the Newark *Star-Ledger*.

Jim Goodness, communications director for the Newark archdiocese, defended Myers against the latest wave of accusations, telling *NCR* "the characterizations are clearly incorrect."

In a mid-August letter to Newark priests, Myers defended himself, admonishing and correcting "deceitful and misleading" news reports, while labeling critics of his child protection record as "simply evil."

"For any who set out to claim that I or the Church have had no effective part in the love and protection of children, is simply evil, wrong, immoral, and seemingly focused on their own self-aggrandizement," the letter said.

"God only knows their personal reasons and agenda. We are still called to love them. And God will surely address them in due time," Myers wrote in the letter.

In the deposition, Myers said he had known Maloney since the late 1960s, when both served as assistant pastors in Peoria. The two would occasionally meet for meals, but were not close friends, and did not stay in touch after Myers moved to Washington, D.C., to study canon law.

But their paths crossed again after Myers returned to Peoria and moved through the diocesan ranks before becoming bishop in 1990.

While Myers said the two "really did not travel in the same circles," the deposition revealed that Maloney would occasionally send the bishop gifts, such as cash, gold and silver coins, and Maloney's own camera. Myers described them as customary during confirmation and Christmas seasons, and no more than other priests. The two would also visit while separately vacationing in Florida, Myers said.

In July 1995, Fr. Gerald Ward, pastor of St. Patrick of Merna in Bloomington, Ill., was contacted by a Springfield, Ill., woman, who told him that her sister -- who later moved to New York -- was abused by Maloney in 1973, when she was 10 years old and he was assistant pastor at Epiphany Parish in Normal, Ill. Maloney was appointed to Epiphany in February 1973, and remained there until 1976; on July 31, 1995, Myers returned him to Epiphany, this time as pastor.

Fr. Ward (no relation to Andrew Ward) relayed the allegation to Msgr. James Campbell, then vicar general and chancellor, who documented it in a Dec. 6, 1995, incident report.

"The New York woman now wants Father Maloney confronted and stopped if he is now engaged in sexual activity with children," the report read.

Campbell asked Fr. Ward to have the sister in New York provide her name so that Maloney could be confronted, and added Ward should indicate to her that "there would be no way to confront Father Maloney without clear indication of an allegation against him and to indicate, at the same time, that we do not doubt her sincerity. However, Father Maloney has a right to defend himself against any person making allegations touching on his reputation."

When shown the report during his deposition, Myers said it was the first time he had seen the document.

In September 2000, a family wrote to Myers with concerns about "what we and many others believe to be the unacceptable and inappropriate behavior of Father Maloney." Among the behaviors they cited was interjecting "inappropriate jokes" and comments into his liturgical celebrations; being spotted on a school night in his car at a pharmacy with a grade-school girl, who spent $20 on candy; and taking eighth-grade girls to lunch outside of school.

Myers responded that month, saying, "We are aware that Father is not perfect, but we are also aware that he is a much-loved pastor, that he cares generously for people and that Epiphany School is thriving under his leadership."

In addressing the non-liturgical complaints, Myers said, "I do know that Father loves people, especially young people, and that he cares for them generously. We have never had allegations of impropriety."

But in August 1999, vicar general Msgr. Steven Rohlfs copied Myers on a letter responding to inappropriate actions by Maloney during a recent confession with an eighth-grade boy. According to the boy's parents, Maloney spoke of "the sexual acts of a fellow priest" with their son, as well as answered his cellphone in the confessional.

When asked if he recalled receiving a copy of Rohlfs' response letter, Myers referred to the "loose system that we had with the two different buildings," which he cited several times in his deposition. The bishop's office was in the cathedral rectory, while the office of the vicar general and chancellor was a block away in the chancery. The arrangement, Myers said, led him to assume that his instructions were carried out but without direct oversight.

"It could be sometimes two weeks of copies that I would get when they moved them from building to building and I sometimes didn't have time to read them all," he said.

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