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Chicago archdiocese releases clergy sex abuse documents

by Brian Roewe

Chicago abuse files

More than 6,000 pages detailing past allegations, reports and procedures related to clergy sexual abuse in the Chicago archdiocese became public Tuesday morning, part of a 2008 settlement between the archdiocese and alleged victims.

The documents pertain to 30 archdiocesan priests credibly accused of sexually abusing children. Of the 30, four have been removed from the priesthood and four have been criminally convicted. Only Joseph L. Fitzharris was both convicted and laicized. Fourteen of the priests are deceased. According to the archdiocese, 95 percent of the cases predate 1988.

"Today no priest with even one substantiated allegation of sexual abuse of a minor serves in ministry in the Archdiocese of Chicago," the archdiocese said in a statement made ahead of the release.

Describing the documents as "upsetting" and "painful to read," the archdiocese apologized to victims and said the image the files portray "is not the Church we know or the Church we want to be." The pages include decisions church officials made decades ago "that are now difficult to justify" but were based upon "the prevailing knowledge at the time," noting that understanding of sexual abuse has evolved since then.

"While we complied with the reporting laws in place at the time, the Church and its leaders have acknowledged repeatedly that they wished they had done more and done it sooner, but now are working hard to regain trust, to reach out to victims and their families, and to make certain that all children and youth are protected," the statement read.

At a press conference Tuesday, attorney Jeff Anderson, who represented plaintiffs in the 2008 settlement, called the documents "an analogue that extends decades," one that tells the tale of choices made by top church officials to keep knowledge of problem priests among themselves and "as a result, hundreds and hundreds of children and families were imperiled."

Among the documents are two depositions: one made by Cardinal Francis George in January 2008, the other of Bishop Raymond E. Godert, vicar for priests from 1987 to 1991, in November 2007. Absent are new files related to former priest Daniel McCormack, though he is discussed in George's deposition. A judge has ordered documents related to McCormack, who in 2007 pleaded guilty of sexual abuse of five young men, remain sealed while further litigation is ongoing. Personnel files for an additional 35 priests listed by the archdiocese on its website as credibly accused have yet to be disclosed.

Anderson said the archdiocese deserves some credit for its transparency by way of its first public disclosure of priest files and for what he labeled the best victims assistance ministry in the country. Still, he noted the transparency only came through legal force and that full accountability can only come when the archdiocese expresses ownership of its mistakes.

The documents themselves, Anderson said, demonstrate that cardinals, vicars and other top officials responded in a way that valued secrecy and self-preservation above the protection of children and families. He would not speculate whether they represented enough support for criminal prosecution against George.

The attorney also disputed a claim the cardinal made Jan. 12 in the archdiocesan newspaper (and in a letter sent to parishioners) in which George acknowledged that the response to abuse allegations "was not always adequate to all the facts, but a mistake is not a cover up."

Anderson said "the files speak for themselves" and contain "much more than mistakes," highlighting two cases in particular: one in which George overrode a decision of his review board by keeping Fr. Joseph Bennett in ministry and another in which the cardinal worked to gain early release from prison for Fr. Norbert Maday.

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Several abuse accusers and their families attended the press conference and spoke of their own cases and the impact of the documents going public. One mother said the documents will open a painful scar for her son, but one that will heal quickly and hopefully give courage to other victims. Another said the documents represent truth particularly in light of archdiocesan claims that there was not a cover up.

Check back with NCRonline.org for further reporting on the documents.

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