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St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese releases names of abuser priests

Brian Roewe | Dec. 5, 2013

1:56 p.m., CST: This post has been updated with comments from BishopAccountability.org President Terrance McKiernan.

Following through on a vow made a month ago, the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese released Thursday the names of 30 former priests with substantiated claims of sexual abuse of minors.

The priests named [1] relate primarily to reported incidents that occurred between the mid-1950s and 1980s. All but one of those with substantiated claims were listed in a 2004 report by the archdiocese as part of a nationwide survey of credibly accused clergy.

The 30th priest is Curtis Wehmeyer, currently serving five years in prison, whose name appeared among others in news reports by Minnesota Public Radio -- based on documents and information supplied by former archdiocesan canon lawyer Jennifer Haselberger -- detailing negligence and lack of adherence to abuse-related archdiocesan policies.

All 30 have been removed from ministry. Two have been laicized, and one was dismissed from his order and dispensed from vows.

Along with each priest's name, the archdiocese included his age, birthday and day of death (when applicable), year of ordination, prior assignments, date of removal from ministry, and current status, including current city and state. It did not disclose the date when a claim was brought against each cleric.

Of those disclosed, 24 were archdiocesan priests; another five served in religious orders (three in the Order of St. Benedict, St. John's Abbey); and one came from the nearby Winona, Minn., diocese. A letter obtained by The Associated Press [2] from Archbishop John Nienstedt to his priests indicated that 92 parishes had at least one accused priest assigned to it, or nearly half of the archdiocese's 188 parishes.

Six of the 30 names became public for the first time, according to Terrance McKiernan, president of BishopAccountability.org. They are Frs. Alfred Longley (deceased), Timothy McCarthy, Paul Palmitessa, Joseph Pinkosh, Richard Skluzacek (deceased) and Raymond Walter.

Saying the release of names will allow for further investigation and greater protection of children in the case of those priests accused still living, McKiernan expressed gratitude to Nienstedt for posting the list, but also for the work of victims in achieving the end.

"They have found a way of transforming the numbers ... into names. And of course names have stories, and names unfortunately have victims. And it?s a really, really crucial achievement," he told *NCR*.

In a column released alongside the list of names, Nienstedt acknowledged that in recent decades some priests "unfortunately have violated the sacred trust" children and families have placed in them.

"This is a tragedy that has caused insufferable harm to victims, their families, parishioners and the Church. I must say once again to all victims of this abuse: I am so sorry for the pain you have endured. You have been on

my mind and in my heart as I offer my daily prayers for you," he said.

Earlier Thursday, word came from Rome that Pope Francis had ordered a new commission [3] to advise him on protecting children from abuse and reaching out to victims. The Vatican was not clear if the new commission would also advise the pope how to handle bishops, like Nienstedt, criticized for their handling of abuse claims.

The names represent 29 of 33 reported by the archdiocese as part of a nationwide census of alleged abusers for the 2004 John Jay study. As for the remaining four names, listed in a separate section, the archdiocese said it could not determine if they had substantiated claims raised against them. Their inclusion in the released list came after Ramsey County District Judge John Van de North ordered the archdiocese release all 33 names, or provide an explanation for choosing not to do so, reported the archdiocesan paper, *The Catholic Spirit* [4].

The list of 33 names routinely came up in legal cases where victims' attorneys pressed for the archdiocese to release the names or for the courts to allow them to do so themselves. Each of the four priests with unsubstantiated claims are no longer in ministry. An investigation is still ongoing in the case of Robert Loftus [5], who was laicized in 1977. Claims against him and Fr. Patrick Ryan (deceased) had not been made public before Thursday, according to McKiernan.

For him, a "telling omission" presented itself in the differing approaches the archdiocese took to presenting information about the substantiated and unsubstantiated priests.

"When it was an issue of asserting that a priest was innocent, they were willing to go into detail. But when the priest is apparently credibly accused, there?s no detail forthcoming, which is kind of a shame," McKiernan said.

As part of the announcement, Nienstedt also revealed new disclosure procedures for the archdiocese. He reiterated that its practice is "to report promptly" all allegations of clergy sex abuse of minors to law enforcement officials and to remove from ministry those with credible claims while an investigation occurs. An amendment to that policy will place the names of priests with credible and substantiated claims on the archdiocesan website and will alert the public through a press release that it has received a credible claim of abuse.

On Nov. 11, Nienstedt announced he would disclose "information about priests who are known by us to have Charter violations," referring to the 2002 Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, the pact U.S. bishops agreed upon in Dallas in 2002 to safeguard against abusive clergy and that outlines policies and procedures for a diocese to follow when presented with an allegation.

The archbishop indicated that a protective order from the Ramsey County District Court impeded the immediate release of names and that the archdiocese had to seek approval from the court before moving forward. The permission came Monday.

In a statement announcing the plan to release names, spokesman Jim Accurso stated that the disclosures are not intended to be final.

"A comprehensive review of clergy files is ongoing presently and the list will be updated regularly as additional announcements are made in the future," he said.

Accurso added that the "new level of disclosure" is a recent development this fall, and could evolve further once the archdiocese receives recommendations from the independent task force it commissioned in late September, or from the independent review of its clergy files, led by former U.S. bishops' conference child protection official Kathleen McChesney.

Currently, there are 14 lawsuits against the archdiocese involving 23 claimants alleging sexual abuse. Since July 1, 2002, it has paid $680,000 to victims.

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