

5-19-08 - Archdiocesan priest defrocked

The Rev. Toohey permanently removed three years after admitting abuse
By Liz F. Kay and Julie Scharper, Baltimore Sun (MD) reporters

A Baltimore priest has been permanently removed from ministry 15 years after allegations that he had committed sexual abuse and three years after he pleaded guilty in court to abusing a minor -- too long a wait for some advocates for abuse victims.

At the request of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Pope Benedict XVI this month defrocked Jerome F. Toohey Jr., who admitted in November 2005 that he sexually abused a high school sophomore in the late 1980s while Toohey was chaplain at Calvert Hall College High School in Towson.

Toohey was stripped of his faculties as a priest -- such as celebrating Mass for anyone other than himself, or serving as a pastor -- after the allegations were made in 1993.

Archdiocese spokesman Sean Caine said the defrocking began under the previous archbishop, Cardinal William H. Keeler. Before his election in April 2005, the pope led the Vatican's Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, which oversees such procedures.

"That is sadly very typical," said David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors' Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP.

"It's hard to believe that church officials really get it and care about it when it takes so long to defrock an admitted or even proven serial predator," he said. "Obviously, everyone deserves due process, but when he's admitted or been found guilty of his crimes it certainly ought not be years."

In a statement,

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien said: "The Archdiocese is committed to protecting children and helping to heal victims of abuse. We are deeply sorry for the pain suffered by survivors of abuse due to actions of clergy, and I echo the words of our Holy Father, who said in his Homily at Nationals Park: 'Great efforts have already been made to deal honestly and fairly with this tragic situation, and to ensure that children -- whom our Lord loves deeply and who are our greatest treasure -- ... grow up in a safe environment. These efforts to protect children must continue.'"

Calvert Hall is operated by Christian Brothers, a religious order, but Toohey was an archdiocesan priest assigned to the school, said school spokesman Doug Heidrick.

In 1993, Michael Goles, a former student at John Carroll School, filed a lawsuit accusing Toohey of abusing him in the 1980s; the case was dismissed because it had not been filed within three years of the alleged incident. Toohey pleaded guilty in Baltimore County Circuit Court in November 2005 to abusing Thomas Roberts when the victim was

attending Calvert Hall and went to the chaplain for counseling about his parents' divorce. Roberts went on to become an anchor at CNN.

Known as "Father Jeff," Toohey was sentenced to 18 months in prison. However, because of threats on his life by other prisoners, he was essentially in solitary confinement. After serving 10 months, Toohey, now in his early 60s, was placed on home detention.

The father of one of Toohey's victims said that the church's actions bring no comfort to his family.

"It's a painful thing where absolutely nobody wins," said Patrick Goles, father of Michael Goles. "We take no solace in it. Nothing will make [the abuse] go away."

Now that the church has defrocked Toohey, Clohessy said, "The important thing now is that church officials don't wash their hands of him."

"We believe that because bishops recruit and educate and ordain and hire and transfer and shield these predators ... they still have a moral and civic duty to warn families about them and protect children from him, whether he's on the church payroll or not," he said.

Frank Dingle, a spokesman for the Maryland chapter of SNAP, said it is ironic that the archdiocese had lobbied for shorter statutes of limitations for abuse allegations when the church took so long to defrock Toohey.

"I think that it's sad that they took so long," Dingle said. "That's not just. Their words [to survivors] are gracious and nice, but their actions show that it's not a priority."

Toohey served as Calvert Hall's chaplain from 1982 to 1993. He who also worked at St. Francis of Assisi Parish from 1977 to 1984, and as chaplain to the deaf community from 1984 to 1993, according to the archdiocese. In addition, he was a member of the board of directors of the John Carroll School and celebrated Mass regularly at St. John the Evangelist Church in Hydes, Baltimore County.