

Bishop welshed on abuse deal
2 men say Rodimer OK'd transfer of priest to Dover
By Abbott Koloff, Daily Record
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Two men accused Bishop Frank Rodimer in court papers filed Friday of trying to keep their families quiet about their alleged sexual abuse by a priest, and then allowing that priest to continue working at a Dover parish for 20 years before removing him one month ago.

The bishop reportedly told families of the two alleged victims at the time that the priest would never again be allowed to work with children.

Monsignor Ronald Tully, 67, was removed from Sacred Heart parish in Dover a month ago for what church officials said at the time was a legal matter that had resurfaced. That legal matter was a criminal charge of sex abuse and two counts of endangering the welfare of children filed in Riverhead, N.Y., in 1979.

Two men who say they were abused by Tully in 1979, when they were teenagers attending a Passaic school where Tully worked, filed papers in a Long Island court Friday that provide details of their allegations. They say Tully took them to his summer home on Long Island, got them drunk, fondled one boy, and pulled down the pants of the other boy and molested him. The boys, 14 and 15 at the time, then ran to a nearby house and police were called.

They said in court papers that one church official threatened their families to keep them quiet 25 years ago and that Rodimer made a promise at the time that he did not keep.

Rodimer, 76, is scheduled to step down as leader of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Paterson next week when Bishop Arthur Serratelli will be installed as head of the diocese. Rodimer and other church officials would not comment on the Tully case Friday, saying they expect the alleged victims to file a lawsuit.

The alleged victims, identified only by their initials in the court papers, came forward to diocese officials after recently learning Tully was still working as a priest and had been promoted to monsignor, their attorney said in legal documents. One of them said in court papers that he works as a police officer in New Jersey. The other lives in Florida.

The two men "discovered that Tully had not only been elevated to the honorary position of monsignor, but had also been appointed pastor of Sacred Heart Parish in Dover, New Jersey, by Bishop Frank Rodimer, a position that inherently involves interaction with parishioners of all ages, including minors," Stephen Rubino, a South Jersey attorney, wrote in court papers.

Rubino would not comment on the case, saying everything he had to say about it was in legal papers filed to support a motion to unseal court records. Those records had been sealed, according to the motion, after the case was dismissed in what is called an adjournment in contemplation of dismissal. In such cases, the accused typically admits no guilt but agrees either to community service or some kind of treatment in exchange for having no criminal record.

An attorney who has been representing Tully did not respond to phone calls Friday.

While church officials would not comment Friday, they previously said that they ruled back in May that Tully no longer is allowed to function as a priest. They also said there are no plans to hold a church trial about the matter. Priests who contest rulings by church officials are given the option of having such a trial. When asked whether church officials knew about the case before this past May, when Tully was removed, some church officials said that was unclear.

"I didn't know anything about it until (May)," Monsignor Herbert Tillyer, vicar general of the diocese and pastor of St. Peter's parish in Parsippany, said in a recent interview.

Tillyer went on to say that someone raised a question about Tully while the priest was pastor of Sacred Heart, but that there had been no specific allegations.

"It was just a question raised about his demeanor, nothing specific in terms of a child," Tillyer said. "I was told that after that, Father Tully didn't go near the school at Sacred Heart because he didn't want anyone questioning him in a negative way."

Marianna Thompson, a spokeswoman for the diocese, said Tully's name had been passed along to prosecutors at some point as part of an agreement with law enforcement agencies. Church officials had agreed to let law enforcement authorities know about all allegations of child abuse made against priests.

The allegations made in court papers raise questions about why church officials did not remove Tully before this past May. American bishops agreed in June 2002, during a conference in Dallas, to immediately remove any priests who had been the subject of credible allegations of child abuse.

Rodimer, according to the court papers, told the families of the alleged victims that if they did not pursue charges, Tully would be punished and not allowed access to children. Another church official, a nun who now works at a religious school in South Jersey, was accused of threatening family members to keep them quiet.

Sister Mary Aquin McDonald was the principal of Pope Pius XII Regional High School in Passaic in 1979, when Tully worked there. She said in an interview with the Daily Record one month ago that she had no memory of the 1979 charges against Tully and suggested asking diocese officials about it.

Rubino wrote in court papers that Sister Mary Aquin not only knew about the case, but pressured the victims' families to drop criminal charges against Tully. He wrote that she suggested to members of one family, originally from Colombia, that they might be deported over the matter.

Sister Mary Aquin did not respond to messages left Friday at the convent where she has been living. She works as director of religious education at the Holy Family Education Center in Sewell, in Gloucester County, which was closed Friday.

"Bishop Rodimer's express promise, as well as threats and harassment ... by Sister Mary Aquin, intimidated (the families) not to pursue the matter legally," Rubino wrote.

He went on to write that allowing Tully to continue working as a parish priest was "a breach of Bishop Rodimer's express promise ... as well as a deliberate act which tolerated, condoned and sanctioned the sexual assault of these two children due to the church's fear of scandal."

Some parishioners at Sacred Heart, where Tully worked for 20 years, have said they have had a hard time believing their former pastor could have done anything wrong. Those contacted Friday said they never had any worries about the safety of children who attend the parish school.

"I think Father Tully was an excellent pastor," said Patricia Fiore, of Stanhope, who has attended Sacred Heart for 15 years. "I could never believe he was capable of such things. I think that for having known him, I'm a better person. I just feel so bad."

"I don't know what to think," said Barbara Decker, of Randolph. "It's very troubling. I feel sorry for the victims. I don't think it's right if the church sweeps things under the carpet."

The two alleged victims wrote in sworn statements that they were attending Pope Pius XII in Passaic when Tully selected them to accompany him for a weekend at his Long Island summer home. The man identified as M.W., who was 14 at the time, said he was so drunk after Tully gave him an alcoholic beverage that he couldn't move when Tully molested him. The man identified as J.M., who was 15 at the time and now works as a police officer in New Jersey, said he had been fondled by Tully before the priest moved to the younger boy.

At one point, J.M. wrote, he picked up a knife but was too scared to use it against Tully. J.M. wrote that he took the younger boy to a bedroom to help him get away from the priest.

"Reverend Monsignor Tully began banging on the door and ordered us to open it," J.M. wrote. "M.W. and I were both terrified that Reverend Monsignor Tully was going to break down the door."

"He threatened to beat us if we didn't open the door," M.W. wrote.

They wrote that they jumped out a window and ran next door, where a neighbor called police. M.W. wrote that Sister Mary Aquin came to his house shortly after Tully was arrested. He said she offered to waive his tuition and provide free school lunches if he would say he lied about what happened.

"Sister Aquin told me I could jeopardize Monsignor Reverend Tully's career, possibly even ruin it," M.W. wrote.

J.M.'s mother, who speaks little English, said in a sworn statement that the nun told her son, who translated for her, that her family "was going to be cited in the church's court; that if J.M. was lying, we were all going to jail and would be in serious trouble. ... Sister Aquin explained that the court matter was a stumbling block which would prevent us from obtaining United States citizenship. Sister Aquin further explained that everything we worked for could be jeopardized by this incident."

J.M. wrote in court papers that Sister Aquin told him nobody would believe his accusations. He wrote that he responded that was telling the truth and was willing to take a lie detector test. M.W. wrote that his mother met with Rodimer, who told her that if they dropped the matter, he would make sure Tully never again had contact with children.

The legal matter was dismissed in 1980, according to court papers, and Tully arrived at Sacred Heart in Dover four years later.