

9-17-07 - Lawyer calls priest in sex abuse suit 'sociopathic'

By Abbe Smith, New Haven Register Staff

NEW HAVEN - A New Haven lawyer said the priest implicated in a clergy sex-abuse lawsuit filed in August against the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Hartford was "one of the most sociopathic abusers" he has dealt with as an attorney.

The suit, filed in Superior Court in New Haven, alleges that the Rev. Ivan Ferguson, now deceased, sexually abused a teenage boy from New Milford for about a year in the late 1970s. According to court documents, the alleged victim's mother worked at St. Bernard's Catholic Church in the Tariffville section of Simsbury in 1977 and 1978, when the abuse was supposed to have taken place.

The lawsuit states that Ferguson befriended the 16-year-old and, while his mother worked, took the boy upstairs to his second-floor bedroom in the rectory and repeatedly sexually abused him.

The lawsuit also claims that Ferguson threatened to fire the boy's mother if he told her about the abuse.

The New Haven Register does not identify the victims in most sexual abuse cases.

Thomas M. McNamara, the attorney for the alleged victim, said he has at least one more sex-abuse lawsuit coming up that involves Ferguson when he was a priest at a Catholic church in Derby, and has had cases against Ferguson in the past. McNamara said the archdiocese actually sent Ferguson away for treatment after receiving complaints about him, and yet he still ended up serving at a church in Derby.

The lawsuit states the archdiocese knew or should have known that Ferguson "posed a danger to minors" at the time and that it was negligent and reckless in failing to prevent the abuse.

In a recent phone interview, McNamara said the pastor of St. Bernard's in the late 1970s witnessed Ferguson bringing young children up to his bedroom on numerous occasions and did nothing about it. He also said another priest in the area was told of the allegations against Ferguson at the time and failed to act.

In 2005, the Hartford Archdiocese reached a \$22 million settlement with 43 alleged clergy sex abuse victims.

That settlement stemmed from abuse claims against 14 priests.

McNamara said his law firm handled 16 of those cases, including two against Ferguson. He declined to give an amount being sought in the new case, but said it was "a lot."

"(The victim's) life would have been significantly different and that is worth significant compensation," he said.

The Rev. John Gatzak, director of communication for the Archdiocese of Hartford, said he could not comment specifically about the lawsuit, but expressed sympathy for victims of sexual abuse in general.

"It's a reminder to pray for the victims of abuse and to strengthen our determination to do all that we can as a church within society to make sure we protect our children and young people," he said.

Gatzak said the Catholic church has taken steps in recent years to protect children from abuse including requiring priests, teachers and diocese employees to go through background checks and special training.