

January 26, 2007 - Norwich Diocese pours millions into abuse suits

By GREG SMITH, Norwich Bulletin

NORWICH -- For Leo Savoie of Norwich, news of another settlement in a priest molestation case by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Norwich is disheartening.

"I'm sure it's shaken the faith of some, but not mine," said Savoie, a devout Catholic and longtime parishioner at the Cathedral of St. Patrick in Norwich.

Since November, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Norwich has paid a total of \$3.1 million to settle claims of molestation at the hands of visiting priest Bruno Primavera.

The latest settlement, \$2 million, was the largest of its kind in the state, according to Robert I. Reardon Jr., who represented Michael Nelligan, 44, in the suit.

Nelligan, a former altar boy and member of the Catholic Youth Organization at St. Mark's Church in Westbrook, claimed Primavera repeatedly molested him in 1978, when he was 15.

A similar suit against Primavera was settled in November, when the church paid \$1.1 million to settle with Michael Long of Waterford, who claimed he was molested by Primavera at St. Mary Church in New London.

Primavera was later convicted of sexual offenses involving teenage boys when he was a teacher at New Mexico Military Institute in New Mexico. He died in February.

Reardon is involved in another pending case in which the Diocese of Norwich is a co-defendant. In that case, a former Jesuit priest serving at St. Thomas Aquinas in Storrs is accused of having a sexual relationship with an underage male student from E.O. Smith High School. Reardon also represented "John Doe" in 2003, against the Rev. Richard T. Buongiorno, Bishop Daniel A. Hart and the Diocese of Norwich. A \$700,000 settlement was reached in that case with Buongiorno agreeing to pay \$350,000 from his personal funds and the church insurance paying the rest.

Like any large organization or business, the Diocese of Norwich, which manages 78 parishes and 28 schools, was able to pay settlements using liability insurance coverage. The insurance covers all claims against the diocese and affiliated churches and organizations, said Joseph T. Sweeney, the lawyer who represented the diocese. The diocese is covered by the Catholic Mutual Group, which exclusively covers Catholic properties and represents 111 dioceses in the United States. The church maintains an account to cover what amounts to a deductible on claims, Sweeney said. The priests themselves are not covered for wrongdoing.

"This is not money coming from the collection basket or the bishop's annual appeal. It comes from the basic operating budgets -- money that the diocese has to maintain for things such as accidental falls and other claims," he said.

In both cases, the diocese was charged with negligent supervision of Primavera.

"This is a very delicate issue," Sweeney said. "This goes against everything these priests stand for."

Lita LaRue, a Catholic from Norwich, said the church cannot be blamed for the conduct of individual priests.

"It's a lot of money," LaRue said of the settlements, "but I'm not worried about it -- God will provide."

Savoie echoed the sentiment, saying, "Priests are human like everyone else. I'm sorry this happened, but the hierarchy did nothing but conceal. They were too busy protecting the institution and not enough feeling for the victims."

Sweeney said the settlements were compromises.

While calling the alleged conduct by Primavera "tragic" and "despicable," Sweeney said the church had disputed many of the facts alleged in the case.

But, he said, "if a jury found the diocese was responsible, and it was a disputed issue, the value of the claim could have potentially been much higher."

The Most Rev. Michael R. Cote, bishop of Norwich, who said he did not know Primavera, wrote a letter of apology to Michael Long's mother in October.

"The abuse of any child by any person is intolerable," Cote wrote. "When the abuser is a Roman Catholic priest, that abuse is an even more profound violation of God's law, and does grave harm to every believing Catholic. Bruno Primavera's actions were an offense against you, your son, and God."

Cote did not answer the Bulletin's requests for an interview.

David Clohessy, executive director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, said settlements by churches help victims in a variety of ways.

"These victims have been deeply wounded," Clohessy said. "It helps as a real acknowledgment that serious harm has been done. The unacknowledged wound never heals."

Large settlements, Clohessy said, despite the fact the church rarely admits wrongdoing, illustrate to the victim "someone at some level has been accountable. It does help. Victims feel like they've done what they can to prevent future abuse."

The financial settlements also draw public attention to the issue, he said.

Settlements in these cases are better for everyone, Reardon said, since "trials are a difficult process for everyone involved, emotional, expensive and time consuming."