

February 14, 2007 - Notes on a scandal: NH clergy abuse five years on
The Union Leader (NH)

On Feb. 11, 2002, Bishop John McCormack's delegate for sexual misconduct by church personnel, Rev. Edward Arsenault, assured then-Attorney General Philip McLaughlin that there were no problems with New Hampshire priests and that the diocese had complied with state law requiring the reporting of sexual abuse.

Four days later, on Feb. 15, the diocese removed seven priests from active ministry and released the names of 14 in all who had been accused of sexual abuse. To see how well the church complied with the statutes requiring the reporting of suspected sexual abuse, consider that one of the priests dismissed on that day was Father John Poirier.

The diocese was aware of Poirier's addictive and compulsive desire for sex with boys and his attempts to fulfill that desire dating as far back as 1975 and recurring through at least 1991. Yet it was not until 2002, when the state attorney general came poking around, that Poirier was removed from ministry.

In Poirier's file was this 1991 note from Chancellor Francis Christian: "As part of our discussions I once again reminded Father Poirier that any public notoriety involved with his compulsive behavior would be the end of his priestly ministry here in the Diocese of Manchester."

Poirier's posing a threat to teenage boys would not "be the end of his priestly ministry" in the diocese. Only the public discovery of it would. There is little evidence that the diocese's attitude has changed in the five years since it acknowledged employing abusive priests.

Releasing those 14 names five years ago today, Bishop John McCormack said, "our church and community will know that no priest is now serving in ministry who has, to our knowledge, engaged in sexual misconduct with a minor."

Those 14 names have grown to about 60. And there undoubtedly are others.

In the half-decade since the diocese first acknowledged that it had a problem with priests sexually abusing minors, it has not transformed into a more forthcoming institution. It is just as secretive and self-protective as always.

The diocese spent about two years resisting and legally challenging state audits of its records to see whether it is shielding abusive priests -- audits it is legally bound to allow.

As a result of its 2002 settlement with the state, which kept diocese officials from being criminally prosecuted, the diocese was supposed to submit to five audits in five years. This is the fifth year and only one audit has been completed; the second is to be finished and released within the next two months, according to the Attorney General's Office.

As far as the diocese taking steps to protect children from predator priests, Attorney General Kelly Ayotte told us yesterday: "They would've done none of it without this settlement. That's been the attitude all along."

Five years later, the attitude hasn't changed. The diocese still acts in its own best interest as a matter of course, and the best interests of parishioners and the public only when forced, by law or public pressure, to do so.