

8-21-08 - Records show repeated complaints

By Nicholas J.C. Pistor, ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, Belleville, IL

BELLEVILLE - Documents released in court Wednesday show that the Belleville Diocese moved the Rev. Raymond Kownacki from parish to parish - even as evidence grew that he couldn't control sexual urges toward underage boys and girls.

Complaints of sexual abuse against Kownacki dated to the late 1960s, the documents indicate, and from Mexico to nearly every corner of Southern Illinois. It took more than 20 years for the priest to be removed from active ministry, according to the internal memos that were displayed before a St. Clair County jury.

A former altar boy is suing the Belleville Diocese for allegedly covering up Kownacki's sex abuse. He says in the lawsuit that Kownacki repeatedly molested him throughout the 1970s, but that he never told his parents or authorities.

Defense attorneys for the diocese say the statute of limitations for the altar boy to sue has run out. They argue that many of the diocesan officials involved in the early complaints against Kownacki are dead, and that the diocese ultimately removed the priest from active ministry in 1995.

Wilton Gregory, a former bishop in Belleville and now archbishop of Atlanta, is among those who may be called to testify in the case. He has been widely praised for his openness in dealing with church abuse allegations.

According to Michael Weilmuenster, the attorney representing the former altar boy, the abuse began just months after diocesan records show they were informed of allegations at another parish that Kownacki raped a 16-year-old girl.

The records indicate the girl became pregnant, and Kownacki attempted to squeeze her uterus to force out the baby. Love letters written by Kownacki to the girl - and kept in Diocesan records - were displayed before the jury.

After the rape accusation, Kownacki was sent away for alcohol abuse treatment, according to diocesan records. A few months later, he was assigned to the altar boy's parish in Salem, Ill., and then-Bishop Albert Zuroweste wrote that he nevertheless had confidence in Kownacki's "knowledge, piety, prudence, experience and general character."

"They left a paper trail," Weilmuenster said.

The complaints to the diocese state Kownacki told his victims things like, "It's okay, I've done it before" and "the Catholic church condones this, other priests do it."

Diocesan documents call Kownacki "sick" and warn that if moved to a certain place it "could be dangerous."

While Kownacki was at the parish in Salem, another boy's family complained of abuse. When the diocese moved Kownacki, the boy's family complained to a diocesan official: "We have done as you've asked and not said anything to anybody."

Kownacki was moved to a parish in Harrisburg in the 1980s, where diocesan records indicate complaints surfaced that he was drinking hard and often had five or six boys staying overnight at the rectory. The Rev. James Margason, a former Belleville Diocese Vicar General, testified Wednesday that the boys said there was no wrongdoing.

Despite the string of complaints, Kownacki continued to be moved - to parishes in Tipton, Madonnaville and Valmeyer.

Margason told parishioners, according to handwritten notes displayed to

the jury, that "What happened in the past is the past" and "This is a new beginning." He also wrote that he discouraged parishioners from repeating the allegations.

While in Valmeyer, the allegations continued, records show. A housekeeper wrote to Margason, stating that boys were staying at the rectory and that she found pornography. The housekeeper said she found a letter Kownacki wrote to one asking for a late-night massage. Their ages couldn't be determined.

Margason repeatedly referred to them as "young men." Weilmuenster called them "young boys."

Kownacki then was moved to ministry that didn't involve children or young adults. He was removed from active ministry in 1995, after a citizen review board was set up to investigate priest sex abuse claims.

Kownacki wasn't defrocked, however. He lives in Dupo and receives diocesan retirement benefits.