

Abuse claim shocks diocese

A Catholic school principal is accused of sexually abusing a woman who was a fellow nun.

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NORWICH-- Catholic elementary school principals throughout the Norwich Diocese expressed shock Wednesday after hearing allegations of sexual abuse made against one of their own.

Gabrielle Azzaro detailed allegations Tuesday against her former superior at a Pennsylvania parochial school, whom the Norwich Diocese confirms is now a principal at one of its elementary schools. Azzaro, a former nun who lives in California, claims the woman used to come into her bedroom 20 years ago and sexually abuse her.

"I was teaching eighth grade (and) she was the principal," Azzaro, now 51, said in a news conference Tuesday. "She would come into my bedroom every night and get her sexual needs met and then turn and fall asleep."

Azzaro would not identify the woman publicly, but gave the name to diocesan officials. Nineteen of the 22 elementary schools in the diocese have female principals.

Mother Martin LeClair, the principal at St. Joseph's School in Norwich, said she knew nothing about the situation until reading a news story Wednesday.

"I cannot fathom in my mind who it could be," she said.

The Norwich Diocese is investigating Azzaro's accusations against the nun, spokeswoman Jacqueline Keller said, but officials are not releasing any details because it is a personnel matter.

Landa Mauriello-Vernon, the Connecticut director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, said Azzaro first reported the abuse to the diocese about six months ago.

"This woman is a principal. And while you'd like to think that the person who harmed you didn't harm anyone else, we know better," Mauriello-Vernon said. "A sexual predator should not be the principal of a school."

Dr. Howard Bennett, superintendent of the diocesan schools, said the parents of school children should not be concerned.

"Nothing that has been reported or is known deals with children," Bennett said. "There have been no children involved in this situation."

Bennett said it's up to the diocese officials whether the principal remains in her position while the issue is being resolved. Keller said the policy is to remove clergy or teachers during investigations involving alleged abuse of minors -- which is not the case in this investigation.

Azzaro has asked the diocese to remove the principal from her school.

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