

Catholic Nun Priest Targets Of Child Sex Abuse Lawsuits

Sister taught at Cor Jesu; priest served Our Lady of Providence

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Times Newspapers (MO)

January 14 –20, 2005

<http://www.timesnewspapers.com/stories/20050114/lawsuits.html>

A Catholic nun, who taught at Cor Jesu Academy in Affton, and a priest, who was pastor at Our Lady of Providence parish in Crestwood, are embroiled in separate controversies involving sexual abuse allegations.

Sister Linda Cusano, who taught at Cor Jesu from 1988 to 1990, is accused of several incidents of sexual misconduct in a lawsuit filed in November. Landa Mauriello-Vernon, once a student of Cusano's at a parochial school in Connecticut, accuses the nun of repeated acts of abuse from 1991-1992.

David Clohessy, national director of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), said the St. Louis Catholic Archdiocese should now be making an effort to encourage local residents to step forward if they have knowledge of misconduct by Cusano while she served in this area.

"We hope anyone else who witnessed, suspected or experienced abuse by Cusano finds the courage to come forward," said Clohessy. "We especially hope that Cor Jesu officials publicly reach out to former students who might have been victimized by Cusano."

Clohessy said SNAP is also urging anyone who may have experienced improper encounters with Fr. Robert F. Johnston to break their silence about any such incidents. According to Clohessy, Johnston admitted in December 2002 that he had abused a boy and then resigned as pastor of Our Lady of Providence parish in Crestwood.

St. Louis Catholic Archdiocese officials say, that to their knowledge, the misconduct by Johnston took place more than 20 years ago.

"We issued a release in 2002 noting that Johnston had admitted sexual misconduct with a minor and that he had resigned from active ministry," said Jamie Allman, spokesperson for the Archdiocese.

Allman said Johnston is in a retirement home and no longer functioning publicly as a priest.

At a press conference in December, Timothy Dempsey announced that he was filing a civil sex abuse lawsuit against Johnston. According to Dempsey's lawsuit, Johnston abused him repeatedly when he was a teen-aged parishioner at Sacred Heart parish in Valley Park.

Another plaintiff, who is filing anonymously against defendant Johnston in the same lawsuit, alleges that he was repeatedly abused as a teen when Johnston was a priest at Sacred Heart parish in Valley Park.

"I suspect that as the cases of Cusano and Johnston move forward, and as other victims and witnesses come forward, proof that church leaders had prior warnings about these two molesters will surface," said Clohessy. "In virtually every civil and criminal case that is allowed to proceed, evidence shows that church officials knew or suspected what had happened, yet they did little or nothing to prevent future abuse."

Victim Goes Public

On Dec. 15, Dempsey held photos of Fr. Johnston and himself as a child before local television cameras, as he announced his abuse lawsuit.

"It was hard to go public," said Dempsey. "Two years ago, when I came forward with my allegations, I would never have dreamed of going public. I worried about what people would think of me. But now, I don't want to see this happen to other kids."

"And to be honest, I am upset with the public," added Dempsey. "People are outraged about gay marriage. People will put a guy in jail with a drug problem. But they look the other way when it comes to our kids being molested by someone they are supposed to look up to."

Dempsey served in the military and now has a job in mass transit. He lives in Pacific with his wife and teen-aged daughters. He said his Catholic faith has been shaken, but he and his wife have sent their daughters to Catholic school.

"I just don't understand why the Archdiocese never takes the abuse reports to the police," said Dempsey. "They always try to keep it quiet, transfer the priests, pay the hush money. It is hypocritical when they hold themselves up above everybody else and talk about morality."

"If you look at Fr. Johnston's case, you see they bounced him around from church to church. From Valley Park to Crestwood. He's been at St. Martin de Porres, St Joachim, St Catherine of Sienna, Church of the Immacolata in Clayton and finally to St. Mary's in Old Mines," noted Dempsey. "They knew they had a problem with Johnston and they wouldn't deal with it."

Dempsey said he tried to confront Johnston about his past abuse at the Regina Cleri Retirement Home where the priest lives in Shrewsbury. After giving a deposition about his abuse to law enforcement, police accompanied Dempsey to the center, but Johnston refused to meet with them.

Cor Jesu Nun Case

Sr. Cusano, who taught at Cor Jesu from 1988 to 1990, was listed as a Hall of Fame honoree at Immaculate Heart Academy in New Jersey up until late last year. That's when SNAP notified the school of the sex abuse lawsuit brought by Mauriello-Vernon months earlier.

"Having her listed in the church school's hall of fame may have discouraged other victims of sexual abuse from coming forward," said SNAP's Clohessy. "It's inconceivable that her order did not know about the legal complaint."

In Mauriello-Vernon's lawsuit, she details one incident in which Cusano repeatedly forced her into a vacant school office, wrestled her to the floor, threw her body on top of hers, yelling at her to "submit herself to God," and "join me in the convent." Cusano was a religion and morals teacher at the school attended by Mauriello-Vernon

now lives in Hamden, Conn., with her husband and two children. When contacted by the Times, she referred questions about her lawsuit to her attorney, Patricia Confrancesco.

Confrancesco said Mauriello-Vernon was stunned and angered when she found Cusano had been named a hall of fame educator. The attorney said her client decided to file the lawsuit when her own daughter reached an age when daycare services were necessary.

"My client became very concerned about the issue of who we entrust our children to, and about their safety," said Confrancesco. "Thinking about those issues brought about the lawsuit, so what happened to her might not have to happen to others."

"I think it would be wise if officials at the church school in St. Louis sent out an advisory to former students of Cusano," added Confrancesco. "I don't think that would be a bad idea at all."

Archdiocese spokesperson Allman said church officials are aware of only one lawsuit locally involving a religious sister. He said it involved a Sister of St. Joseph. In that case, a settlement with the victim was reached by the order, and the accused nun has since passed away.

"If the case involving the nun who taught at Cor Jesu is presented to us, we don't care where or when an incident is said to have happened, we will look into it," said Allman. "With all cases, we encourage anyone who feels they've been victimized to go to the civil authorities. And when the civil authorities contact us, we will cooperate."