

Diocese settles abuse lawsuit Ex-altar boy to get more than \$100,000

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STAMFORD

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport Tuesday settled a lawsuit by a former altar boy claiming he was abused by the Rev. John Castaldo in a Trumbull church in the early 1990s.

While both sides agreed to keep terms of the settlement secret, sources close to the case said the diocese will pay in excess of \$100,000 to the former altar boy, who is now 27 and lives in Bridgeport.

The sources said the plaintiff's lawyers, Ernest Teitell and Paul Slager, had originally sought more than \$1 million. The settlement was reached as lawyers for the plaintiff and the diocese picked a jury in Stamford Superior Court for a February trial.

It also comes little more than a week before New York Cardinal Edward Egan was set to testify under oath in a deposition about his prior knowledge of problems with Castaldo while Egan was bishop of the Bridgeport Diocese.

The diocese has paid out more than \$37 million in settlements to people who claimed they were abused by priests since the 1950s.

The lawsuit in this case claimed Castaldo kissed the then-14-year-old altar boy on the mouth at least five times in the sacristy at St. Theresa Church in Trumbull in 1990.

It also stated the priest took the plaintiff, known only in court papers as "John Doe," and two other altar boys on a trip to Disney World in Florida in August 1991 and sexually assaulted the complainant during that trip.

Teitell said his client was molested while the priest and the boy shared the same bed in a condo belonging to a parishioner. He said his client, who is not married, suffered extensive psychological trauma as a result of the incident.

"He had a complete loss of trust in the church," he said. "He had been an altar boy and was very devout, but as a result of this breach in trust he has completely moved away from the church."

Teitell said his client has been receiving psychiatric therapy. "One of the benefits of the settlement is that he will have the funds to continue receiving therapy," he said.

"For our client, this case is about more than money," Slager said. "He had the courage to bring this case because he read about Castaldo's arrest for sexual misconduct with another adolescent boy, and he wanted to make sure it never happened again."

Bishop William E. Lori said in a written statement Tuesday: "This legal settlement is the right thing to do. We agree that the resolution of this case is a part of the healing process, and hope that this young man will find closure and reconciliation."

A second lawsuit against the diocese by another former altar boy at St. Theresa Church who also claims he was abused by Castaldo is still pending. However, sources said a settlement is also expected in that case.

Sources said that boy had done his best to repress the alleged abuse when he was contacted by diocese officials who told him he had been named as a possible Castaldo victim.

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests on Tuesday praised the plaintiff for filing the lawsuit and criticized church officials.

"We caution Catholics against reading more into this settlement than they should," SNAP said in a statement. "Sadly, it is most likely a business decision by the church lawyers and accountants, designed in part to prevent evidence of coverups from being presented in open court."

In court papers, Teitell and Slager state that Castaldo had been ordained by the Bridgeport Diocese despite two separate psychological assessments that he "was fearful of his own aggressive drives," had "difficulty accepting his own sexual urges and desires as normal," and was preoccupied with his "unresolved sexual urges."

Castaldo had previously been expelled from his seminary for "remarkably bizarre behavior," the court papers state.

In May 2001, Castaldo, then chaplain at Trinity Catholic High School in Stamford, was caught in a sting operation by New York police and charged with trying to solicit sex via the Internet from an undercover officer posing as a 14-year-old boy.

Castaldo later pleaded guilty to the charge and was sentenced to one weekend in jail and five years probation. He was subsequently removed from his position by Lori, who also suspended Castaldo's ability to function as a priest.

Diocese spokesman Joseph McAleer said prior to the early 1990s the diocese had no indication that Castaldo posed a threat to young people. "In fact, the diocese received no complaints of sexual misconduct by Castaldo until May 2001, when Castaldo was arrested, and Bishop Lori removed him immediately from ministry," he said.

Castaldo served as parochial vicar at the Trumbull church from 1987 to 1992.

He was subsequently moved by then-Bishop Egan to St. Mark in Stratford, where he served from 1992 to 1994. He then went to St. Edward the Confessor in New Fairfield from 1994 to 1998 and St. Rose of Lima in Newtown until 1999.