

5-19-08 - Nun who pressed Boston church leaders to combat abuses dies

By RODRIQUE NGOWI, Associated Press Writer, Worcester Telegram & Gazette

BOSTON— Sister Catherine Mulkerrin, who repeatedly pressed Roman Catholic church leaders in Boston to warn parishioners about priests who had been accused of sexually abusing children, has died. She was 73.

Mulkerrin died Saturday at Bethany Health Care Center in Framingham after a 24-year battle with cancer, said Sister Joanne Gallagher, spokeswoman for Mulkerrin's religious order, the Sisters of St. Joseph in Boston.

Mulkerrin received allegations of clergy abuse and dealt directly with victims while working as assistant director of the Boston Archdiocesan Office for Victims of Abuse from 1992 to 1994. She said she received allegations against more than 100 priests in that period. Many of her memos to her supervisors later were released as part of lawsuits filed against the archdiocese by alleged victims.

"I know I sound like a broken record," according to one memo from Mulkerrin that was released in 2002, "but we need to put in church bulletins 'It has come to our attention a priest stationed here between 19XX and 19XX may have molested children - please contact ...'"

She said in a deposition that archdiocese leaders ignored her repeated concerns that priests accused of sexual abuse were allowed to return to parish work without the kind of supervision she had recommended.

"I expressed concern, consternation. What are we thinking of? What are you thinking of?" Mulkerrin said in a deposition released April 8, 2003, about her conversations with Bishop John McCormack, her boss who handled sexual abuse complaints involving priests as an aide to Cardinal Bernard Law, then head of the archdiocese. Law resigned in 2003. McCormack became bishop of New Hampshire in 1998.

She said in the deposition McCormack told her he was trying to address her concerns. He later said through a spokesman he was following policy, but acknowledged he made mistakes during his time in Boston.

"She really confronted the Archdiocese of Boston six years before the sexual abuse scandal broke out ... I think that she was incredibly brave to do that," said Sheila Boyle, 60, of Malden, an editor and author who received a settlement from the church after she was abused by a now-defrocked priest. "It took a tremendous amount of guts to do that at a time when no one really knew the breadth or scope of crisis was."

Boyle said when she talked with Mulkerrin years later, the nun said she thought that she had been a failure. But her sensitive and compassionate handling of sexual abuse victims avoided subjecting them to additional psychological trauma, Boyle said.

The clergy abuse scandal that has wracked the church erupted in Boston in 2002. Pope Benedict repeatedly addressed the issue on his U.S. visit in April. He also met privately with five clergy abuse victims, and Law's successor as archbishop, Cardinal Sean O'Malley.

Mulkerrin "was a gentle, caring woman with a wonderful sense of humor which those who knew her saw manifested in many ways," the Sisters of St. Joseph in Boston said in a statement.

She became a nun in 1955, working as a teacher and college librarian. She served six years as president of her order in Boston, resigning after her cancer diagnosis in 1984. She later began working for the Boston Archdiocese.

She is survived by her brother, Joseph Mulkerrin of Virginia Beach, Va.

Visiting hours were set for Monday evening at Motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Joseph, followed by vigil prayer and funeral liturgy at Motherhouse Chapel. Prayer of Final Commendation were scheduled for Tuesday morning in Motherhouse Chapel. Burial will follow at St. Patrick's Cemetery, Natick.