

9/14/07 0 Priest pays price for speaking about abuse

By Abbott Koloff, Daily Record (NJ)

Monsignor Kenneth Lasch said he once overheard fellow priests talking about him. "Why doesn't Lasch keep his mouth shut?"

Lasch said he wrote those priests to suggest getting together to explain why he had become an advocate for victims of clergy sexual abuse. No one took him up on the offer, he said, and even priests who remained his friends became quiet when he brought up the issue. He wrote for years to the present bishop, Arthur Serratelli, asking for a meeting.

Lasch said an attorney wrote back telling him that wasn't going to happen.

So Lasch became in some ways an outsider in the church he says he loves.

"It's like the death of a wife," he said.

National recognition

Lasch, 70, of Morristown, will be one of three priests receiving a national Priest of Integrity Award next month from Voice of the Faithful, a lay group that discusses possible reforms to the Catholic Church. The award was created to honor priests who have been supportive of sex abuse victims. It comes at a time when Lasch has been pulling back from some of his advocacy for victims because it was affecting his health.

He said he had been having panic attacks over the past few weeks, waking up with tightness in his chest. "It was the stress of dealing with this issue with such intensity for so long," he said.

He had been asking to meet with Serratelli, but says he was rebuffed over a period of more than a year. Church officials did not respond to that Thursday, but Marianna Thompson, the bishop's spokeswoman, issued a brief statement offering congratulations on Lasch's award.

"It is always good to see one of our priests honored," Thompson said in the statement.

Mendham beginning

Lasch was pastor of St. Joseph's in Mendham in 1985 when a parishioner named Mark Serrano came forward with allegations that the former pastor, James T. Hanley, molested him. Hanley has since admitted to molesting at least a dozen children. Church officials acknowledged sending Hanley to work in another parish for a year after learning of the allegations. They removed him after the Serranos came to them, outraged, after seeing a photo in the diocese newspaper showing Hanley celebrating Mass with children.

Hanley later was sent to work at a hospital in Albany, N.Y.

In 1995, Lasch sent letters to parents and called them to a meeting where he talked about the allegations. He said a diocese attorney told him not to hold the meeting but he ignored the advice.

Lasch said he expected things to change for the better after the meeting. He sent a letter to Bishop Frank Rodimer, then the head of the diocese, suggesting a summit on sex abuse to be attended by clergy, journalists and psychologists.

He waited for an answer that never came.

"I naively hoped for a response," he said.

Emerging advocate

Over the years, victims called Lasch and asked for advice. He created files on cases of sexual abuse, hoping that one day church leaders would be more open about the issue. He said he gave up in 2001 and decided to burn the files on a hibachi. He took the ashes to the St. Joseph's cemetery and scattered them.

"It was time to let go of this stuff," Lasch said.

Then came the scandal in Boston, and Serrano decided to go public with his story in March 2002. Lasch's church hosted a meeting of Hanley's victims and their family members a month later. He allowed a victims' group, the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, to meet at his church. He allowed a monument to victims to be placed at the parish. He talked to other priests about the issue and some thanked him for being a victim's advocate. But this is what he said he usually heard:

"Silence."