

9-27-08 - Scranton Diocese comes clean on abusive priest

Former eighth-grade teacher now living in a Missouri facility under 24-hour watch

By Laura Legere, Staff Writer, The Times-Tribune (PA)

The Diocese of Scranton has released the name and history of a priest who was found by the church to have sexually abused one boy in the 1970s and who is suspected of abusing at least three more. The diocese had never before disclosed the Rev. Robert Gibson as a sex offender.

The diocese's account of the priest opens a window on an internal process designed in the 1990s to allow the church to investigate and discipline its own spiritual leaders while also addressing emerging concerns about sexually abusive members of the clergy.

The diocese released the account to address concerns voiced by one of the Rev. Gibson's victims, now a 48-year-old retired Navy officer, who criticized the diocese's policy for dealing with abuse victims after reading a story about other victims' similar concerns published in The Sunday Times in July.

In 2007, Michael Baumann, who now lives in Chesapeake, Va., told the diocese that the Rev. Gibson had sexually abused him in 1973 and 1974, when the Rev. Gibson was his eighth-grade religion teacher at Notre Dame Junior/Senior High School in East Stroudsburg.

Mr. Baumann describes the experience as "nine months of pure hell," during which he was repeatedly abused in a church rectory and while on a trip with the Rev. Gibson to Disney World.

He never spoke of the experience, but neither did he forget about it. Now, he said, "I'm tired of being embarrassed and ashamed of it. It took me a long time, but it finally dawned on me that I'm not the one to blame for this."

When Mr. Baumann made his report, he found he was not the first person to come forward about the priest's actions. The Rev. Gibson had been transferred a decade before to a monitored Missouri treatment facility for troubled Catholic priests, including pedophiles and other sex offenders.

In a statement to The Times-Tribune, William Genello, a diocese spokesman, recounted that past:

On Jan. 5, 1995, the diocese was approached by an attorney for a man who claimed he had been sexually abused by the Rev. Gibson 20 years earlier.

The priest admitted the abuse and four days later resigned as the pastor of St. Bernadette Church in Canadensis, where he was stationed at the time.

The diocese sent the priest for treatment at the Villa St. John Vianney Hospital in Downingtown, a behavioral health center for members of the clergy. After the Rev. Gibson was released, the diocese instructed him to continue therapy and assigned him to live under supervision, and without a pastoral role, at the St. Ignatius Rectory in Kingston.

In the spring of 1997, a mother reported that the Rev. Gibson was paying a troubling amount of attention to her son. After an internal investigation, the diocese found the priest was "likely 'grooming' the boy for improper activity." In September, the diocese's Clergy Review Board, a group of clerics and lay people that reviewed such allegations, determined that the Rev. Gibson "could not be trusted to have any public ministry or reside in any Diocesan facility."

On Feb. 1, 1998, the Rev. Gibson was placed at the St. John Vianney Renewal Center in Dittmer, Mo., the residential treatment facility run by a religious order that ministers to troubled priests. Bishop James C. Timlin, the head of the diocese at the time, barred the Rev. Gibson from wearing clerical clothes outside the center and stripped him of his priestly faculties. For the last 10 years, he has had no public ministry or contact with young people and has been monitored 24 hours a day.

In all, four people have reported to the diocese that they were abused by the Rev. Gibson, a number Mr. Baumann suspects is "very low."

What troubles him about the diocese's response is that the accusations against the Rev. Gibson have never been publicly investigated, despite the fact that the church considers the priest a threat.

Statutes of limitation have prevented him and other victims from bringing charges against the priest. There is no record in Pennsylvania court databases of the Rev. Gibson ever having been charged with a sex crime, his name does not appear on any of the online databases of pedophile priests kept by watchdog groups, and his name is not listed on Pennsylvania, Missouri or federal Megan's Law databases.

"I am horrified by the constant feeling that the church has one goal — to silence victims, which sounds, looks and feels remarkably like what my abuser did," Mr. Baumann wrote in an e-mail. "If the church was truly interested in helping me and other victims, they would pull their records out and surrender them to the legal authorities."

According to Mr. Genello's statement, the diocese acted in accordance with the sexual abuse policy that was in effect between 1993 and 2003, which did not require any public disclosure of clerics accused of sexual abuse. Since 2003, the diocese has followed a revised policy that includes periodically publishing a notice in parish bulletins asking victims of sexual abuse to come forward.

Mr. Genello provided The Times-Tribune with a copy of such a notice, published in a 2005 bulletin of the Canadensis church where the Rev. Gibson was once a pastor. While it describes the resources available to victims of abuse, it does not name priests who have been found to have committed such acts.

Mr. Baumann said he doubts the usefulness of that effort, since most victims of clergy sex abuse "don't read church bulletins."

"A lot of people that are in my position, that had the experience I had as a child, don't keep up with the Catholic Church," he said by telephone. "There's not a lot of comfort there for us."

He has also not found much comfort in the diocese's program for sexual abuse victims. For example, he rebuts the claim made by Mr. Genello in a July 23 letter to the editor published in The Times-Tribune that "Bishop Joseph F. Martino always reaches out personally to each victim to express his deep sorrow."

Mr. Baumann received a letter from Chancellor James B. Earley expressing the diocese's "apology for the pain and anguish you have experienced" as well as an invitation to work with the diocese's victim-assistance coordinator and to meet with the bishop. But, Mr. Baumann said, "I haven't heard word one from the bishop of Scranton."

In his statement, Mr. Genello said he had a conversation with Mr. Baumann and "explained that the bishop does not contact the victim, but expresses his sorrow and offers to help within a meeting that is arranged with the victim, if the victim so desires." Mr. Baumann has declined offers to meet with the bishop and, when Mr. Genello offered, also declined to have the bishop contact him, he said.

About some of Mr. Baumann's requests, including calls for outside accountability, Mr. Genello wrote that they "cannot be fulfilled because they involve procedures that were not part of the policy in effect at the time that the abuse occurred.

"Unfortunately, with any case involving abuse," he added, "nothing can totally undo the harm done to the victim."

Mr. Baumann said he is not hoping for the diocese to rewrite the past.

"I don't think anyone in my position is naive enough to expect that," he wrote in an e-mail.

"What I want is for the diocese to stop compounding the harm."