

June 12, 2007 - Lawyer: Diocese hired priests suspected of molesting boys

By Sam Hemingway, Burlington Free Press (VT) Staff Writer

The state's Roman Catholic diocese is facing new allegations that it hired two priests in the 1960s and 1970s suspected of molesting boys, then kept them employed after receiving reports of their sexual misconduct while working in Vermont.

The allegations are contained in a document filed late last week in Chittenden Superior Court by Jerome O'Neill, the attorney for a Virginia Beach, Va., man who claims that former Rev. Alfred Willis molested him in 1977.

The document, titled "Plaintiff's statement of disputed material facts," was filed with the court Friday with the stated purpose of combating efforts by the diocese to have the pending case dismissed. The case is set to go to trial next week.

"It was the pattern and practice of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington to cover up adult and child sexual abuse by its priests, to fail to supervise its clergy in this respect," O'Neill wrote in the court document.

The diocese, in court papers, has asked the court to prevent O'Neill from bringing up evidence about how the diocese handled other child molestation claims against priests over the years and said it had no prior knowledge of child molestation misconduct by Willis.

Judge Ben Joseph has yet to rule on the diocese's request. O'Neill declined comment Monday and Tom McCormick, a diocesan attorney, did not respond to a request for an interview.

The two priests, both retired, are identified only by their initials in O'Neill's filing, which cites internal church documents as the source of the information. O'Neill had access to the church documents as part of his preparation for the upcoming trial. While neither priest is the target of any of the 25 priest child sexual abuse lawsuits pending in the Burlington court, the diocese made out-of-court financial settlements to resolve child sexual abuse claims brought against both men, court records show.

According to the new filing, one of the priests was hired by then-Bishop Robert F. Joyce in 1963 despite warnings that he not be given "an assignment in a high school for boys."

In 1987, the priest was sent to a clerical retreat after admitting to various instances of molesting boys in the years after he began working in Vermont parishes. According to church documents cited in O'Neill's filing, then-Bishop John Marshall was reluctant to punish the priest for his conduct.

"He has served our people not only faithfully but well throughout his priesthood," Marshall wrote to the pastor of a Connecticut parish where the priest was temporarily assigned.

The diocese continued to receive allegations about the priest's conduct through 2002, according to church documents. O'Neill's filing said there was no evidence that the diocese ever suspended the priest from church duties or defrocked him.

The other priest singled out in O'Neill's filing was refused ordination in Vermont by Joyce in 1966 after being dismissed from seminary school a year earlier for "bad moral conduct."

He was then accepted for ordination by Marshall in 1973, according to court documents cited by O'Neill. In 1977, he was the subject of a complaint of "inappropriate behavior with a 14-year-old altar boy on several occasions," O'Neill's filing said.

In 1990, Marshall told the priest to "seek employment elsewhere," but in 1994, then-Bishop Kenneth Angell told the priest it would be all right to perform Mass at a convent "as long as there are not altar servers."

The diocese also continued to receive complaints about this priest's conduct with boys through 2002. He was suspended from most priestly duties but was never defrocked, according to church records cited by O'Neill.

Court records show that another priest, Edward Paquette, was hired by the diocese in 1974 despite evidence he had molested boys in two other states.

Paquette, named in 18 of the pending priest child molestation cases in Burlington, was suspended from his priestly duties in 1978 but was not defrocked. He is retired and lives in Westfield, Mass.