

Adirondack Daily Enterprise

Diocese of Ogdensburg has 14 sex abuse lawsuits, higher proportion than others in state

WATERTOWN — In raw numbers, the Diocese of Ogdensburg seems to have a disproportionately large number of sexual abuse cases filed against its priests compared to the numbers filed in much larger dioceses, causing lawyers to look into the role the North Country has played for the Catholic Church over the years.

At a news conference in Watertown on Thursday, attorneys working with victims in dioceses throughout the state displayed a chart indicating the number of cases filed, the number of new perpetrators named since a victims act went into effect and the total number of named perpetrators in each diocese.

Under the newly enacted Child Victims Act, 14 lawsuits were filed against the Diocese of Ogdensburg on Wednesday.

By comparison, Syracuse, with 289,000 faithful according to the diocese's Facebook page, and Rockville Centre, with 1,531,445 faithful according to the diocese's website, had six and 19 cases filed, respectively.

"We've been watching things up here. They've been on our radar," Jeff Anderson, principal of Jeff Anderson and Associates, said before the press conference, *"We're looking into whether this is a place priests were moved if they were accused."*

Anderson with Cynthia LaFave, principal of LaFave, Wein & Frament and Taylor Stippel, Anderson and Associates, spoke on behalf of the victims

and praised the new act as an opportunity for survivors to *“regain their power.”*

The Child Victims Act supplies a 365-day window that opened on Wednesday, giving survivors of child sexual abuse one year to bring lawsuits in cases that were previously barred by the statute of limitations, no matter when the abuse occurred.

“It’s the beginning of permission for survivors to take action and be believed,” Anderson said, The director of communications for the Diocese of Ogdensburg, Darcy Fargo, said on Thursday that while the diocese could not speak to any specifics in ongoing litigation, it has been working with victims.

“I will note that the diocese did conduct an independent reconciliation and compensation program,” Fargo said, *“That was a two-year program, and that made options available for victims for counseling, for reconciliation and for compensation, and this is potentially a new option for victims, going through the state Child Victims Act and having the right to sue for compensation. Ultimately it is our goal to help any victim find healing through whatever mechanism they choose to pursue.”*

The lawyers acknowledged after the press conference that the diocese had taken some steps but said it had concealed more truth than it had shared, noting, *“Half-truths are whole lies.”*

Through the lawsuits, the lawyers are seeking information they deem as important to protect other children and help other victims heal, like whether accused priests are still living and if so, their location and whether or not they are still acting priests.

“It’s time for truth to be known that has been so hidden by so many, for so long,” Anderson said.

Fargo said there have been no recent claims against clergy in the diocese.

“As a diocese, we have received no credible allegations of this having occurred in the last 20 years,” she said. *“So we would like to think that the*

mechanisms that we put in place are working and that we are doing a better job.”

LaFave and Anderson, however, said it often takes victims a long time to come forward because the abuse of their trust by an important authority figure dis-empowers and traumatizes them.

They also said children who come forward are often not believed or considered “credible” by the adults they tell.

Of the 14 cases filed, four priests were accused for the first time, including the Rev. James A. Delbel, the Rev. Joseph Francoeur and the Rev. Andrew Mulvaney, all deceased, and the Rev. John “Jack” L. Downs, who is retired but is still ministering to a community, according to Anderson.

Other priests named in the lawsuits include the Rev. John Fallon, the Rev. Edwin A. Kennedy, the Rev. Emile G. LaLonde, the Rev. Gerald F. McGrath, the Rev. Liam O’Doherty, the Rev. Albert R. Plante, the Rev. Robert Shurtleff, the Rev. Clark S. White and the Rev. Paul Worczak.

The allegations against the priests involved their time at parishes throughout the diocese, including Notre Dame and St. Mary’s Cathedral, Ogdensburg; St. Lawrence and St. Joseph, Massena; St. Mary’s, Potsdam; Holy Family, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart and St. Patrick’s, Watertown; St. Andrew’s, Sackets Harbor; St. Cyril of Alexandria, Alexandria Bay; St. Martin, Port Leyden; St. Ann, Saint Regis Falls; St. John the Baptist, Madrid; Holy Angels, Altona; St. Joseph, Mooers and St. Elizabeth, Elizabethtown.

NEWSLETTER

Today's breaking news and more in your inbox

I'm interested in (please check all that apply)

Daily Newsletter
 Breaking News

EMAIL ADDRESS

SUBSCRIBE