

The Pueblo Chieftain

Former Pueblo priest Bonfadini denies rape allegations

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Leo Bonfadini emphatically denies that he ever raped a 17-year-old boy when he was a priest and administrator at Pueblo's Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in 1979.

The accusations came rushing back last week.

Bonfadini is one of 43 Catholic priests named in the Colorado Special Master's Report on child sexual abuse who are accused of sexually abusing at least 166 children in Colorado since 1950. The report was initiated by the Colorado Attorney General's office, in cooperation with the Catholic dioceses in Colorado, including the Pueblo Diocese.

The former Pueblo priest, who now lives in Denver, drove down for an interview with The Pueblo Chieftain on Monday, with Pueblo attorney Joe Koncilja present.

Koncilja, whose family was close with Bonfadini, represented him in 1994 after the victim reported the alleged abuse.

Koncilja said there obviously is another side to this story.

"I am sure that there are and have been abuses by many religious denominations of parishioners young and old. But I am equally sure that there are some members of the clergy who have ministered to the broken and unstable members of society and have been victimized by those they tried to help," he said.

"These allegations are devastating and life-altering. To be sure, there are victims on both sides of this discussion."

Bonfadini said he learned about the report after a Denver news channel contacted him for comment.

“I was totally blindsided ... I was driving in a storm coming from Boulder. I feel a tremendous sense of anguish, loss, grief. I am grieving for sure,” he said.

Bonfadini said everything came back tenfold with the release of the report, which detailed allegations that came out 15 years after the alleged rape.

The sister of the victim called Bonfadini and told him that her brother was saying there may have been something sexually inappropriate that happened between the two.

Koncilja said it was suspect that the victim worked for Bonfadini for two years between the alleged sexual abuse and the time he reported it.

“If somebody abused you, why would you work for that priest? He worked at the church with him and then the allegations came forward,” Koncilja said.

Bonfadini said after the allegations surfaced in 1994, he was in such pain that he later left the priesthood.

“I directed my energy into my work with the Air Force as a crisis intervention therapist. After I retired from the Air Force, I worked for the Veterans Administration for nearly 10 years in acute care, chronic care and hospice care,” Bonfadini said.

Bonfadini was in the Air Force before he chose to enter the priesthood in 1974. He started at Pueblo East Side’s Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1979.

Bonfadini said the case has changed his relationship with his family, friends and colleagues.

“It was devastating. Instead of sitting with the devastation, I had to do something. It completely changed my life. Pueblo is a town that I love. This is like my home. I went to school here. I did so much of my work here. It changed everything,” he said.

“I miss Pueblo. Pueblo has been a home for me. I have so many ties here. There’s nothing like Pueblo as far as I am concerned.”

According to the state report, the Pueblo Diocese conducted an extensive investigation after receiving the allegations, including interviewing Bonfadini and others.

Koncilja, who said the Diocese of Pueblo had no protocol to handle this kind of a complaint, and was unaware of the details until the report came out last week.

“They never provided me with the interviews. The church was being very protective of the people who made the allegations,” Koncilja said.

Continuing, Koncilja said that with a group of lawyers present, he met with the diocese-identified victim in Denver in 1995. Koncilja pointed out that the story he heard then was completely different from anything he had heard previously.

According to Koncilja, the alleged victim said he was in a church and that for some reason, he passed out. And when he woke up, he knew that something had happened, but he didn’t know what it was.

“When I started to question him, they stopped me and threw me out of the meeting,” Koncilja said, adding that the victim’s account made no sense.

Koncilja said the alleged victim had no vivid memory of the alleged abuse and questioned why he would wait so long to report it.

Both Bonfadini and Koncilja said a vicar general of the Pueblo Diocese was told by the alleged victim the sexual abuse did not happen.

“If the diocese knew that this statement was made, then the diocese should have sent that statement to the attorney general, along with the other information they sent,” Koncilja said.

Koncilja said he has reached out to the diocese and was told Monday that the alleged victim did not say the abuse didn’t happen. The Pueblo Chieftain also attempted to contact the diocese Monday but there was no response.

Meanwhile, Bonfadini even reached out to the alleged victim on Facebook.

“I invited him to join us today. Not so much for an interview with you, but to talk to him along with Joe,” Bonfadini said.

The investigation into the incident lasted for months, and the Pueblo Diocese offered genuine support and care for victims, according to the AG report.

The Pueblo Diocese ultimately closed its investigation of Bonfadini as “inconclusive.” Specifically, in this and other cases, the Pueblo Diocese found sexual abuse of a child accusations unsubstantiated unless either the priest admitted them or a firsthand non-victim witness supported them.

The report said it does not appear that the Pueblo Diocese reported Bonfadini’s sexual abuse to any law enforcement authority.

Koncilja said he also is not impressed with the due process the attorney general’s office has done with the report.

“I think that they should have reached out to the priests in this report that are still alive and ask if there was anything they may have to add to it.

“This thing is like the tobacco settlement. They are getting all the people together and then they are going to settle with them and then there are not going to be any more lawsuits,” Koncilja said.

A constant question on Bonfadini’s mind is, “Why?”

“Why would he make this up? He was a guy that I supported and encouraged. He was talented and gifted.

“He was great. He did a great job. He brought a sense of humor into the rectory, that’s for sure. Certainly a sense of color. He was energetic and fun to be around. He was fun to work with. I never had any unpleasant experiences in his working with me,” Bonfadini said.

Bonfadini said he loves Pueblo, but felt uncomfortable coming back Friday to meet with Koncilja.

“I didn’t even want to go to the restaurants I usually go to. I just came to town and then went home. I didn’t even call my brother, who lives here,” he said.

He denied the allegations numerous times during his interview Monday with The Chieftain.

“I was shocked. I mean, ‘Why?’ This makes no sense. He knows me. I didn’t indulge myself in my hurt. That’s when we immediately called the diocese’s attorney. I wasn’t sure if they heard about it or not, and they had to hear it from me.”

Throughout the interview with The Chieftain, Bonfadini received encouraging and uplifting text messages from friends.

“It makes me feel supported,” Bonfadini said as he scrolled through messages on his phone. “It makes me feel loved.”

Bonfadini said he will move forward by cooperating as much as he can with Koncilja.

“I will follow his direction because I want to see this resolved professionally,” he said.

“I live my life day to day. I’ve been reading a lot more; being quiet, kind of withdrawn. I sent a note to all of my friends asking them to support my being withdrawn for now.”

Bonfadini says the accusations have all but destroyed his life.

“Even if I am proved right, you can’t un-ring the bell. I will remain withdrawn for now.”

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