

Lawsuit: Former Providence priest trafficked children for sex

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And, the suit says, the Diocese actively thwarted efforts to stop the predator priest, instead giving him a new assignment, to St. Martha Church in East Providence.

A priest in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence trafficked children for sex, using the guise of international charitable work to prey on boys at orphanages in Haiti and rectories in Rhode Island, a lawsuit filed Thursday says.

The diocese and its defenders looked the other way and actively thwarted efforts to stop the predator priest, the suit says. In one instance, a parishioner who later became associated with the diocese's legal counsel reported leaving a party at a rectory because he was made uncomfortable by the presence of boys, some dressed in diapers, according to the suit.

And even today, the diocese continues to blithely minimize the toll of child sexual abuse, the suit says, such as when a West Warwick parish priest said recently that "pedophilia doesn't kill anyone."

The allegations are laid out in a complaint filed Thursday in Superior Court, Providence, against the diocese, Bishop Thomas Tobin, retired Bishop Louis Gelineau, and St. Joseph Church in Providence.

Reached Thursday, Gelineau declined to comment, citing his advanced age — he turns 92 in May — and frail health. He would not be able to analyze the issues or recall facts enough to make a comment, he said.

The diocese did not respond immediately to a request for comment sent after 4 p.m. Thursday.

The plaintiff, Robert Houllahan, a 51-year-old Providence resident, says he was molested as a child by the Rev. Normand Demers — who received the “protection and affirmative assistance” of the diocese and its leaders, the suit said. Houllahan is represented by attorney Timothy J. Conlon, who has represented numerous other priest-abuse victims.

Houllahan himself does not say he was trafficked to the United States for sex, but said he saw children from Central America when he was brought upstairs to Demers’ private quarters in the rectory of St. Joseph in Providence. Houllahan was molested there by two men, Demers and an unidentified person, the suit says.

Demers, who died in 2018, was included last year in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence’s list of clergy who it deemed had been “credibly accused” of sexually abusing minors.

Demers was removed from ministry in 2002, more than a decade after the diocese became aware he’d been accused of misconduct with minors at an orphanage in Haiti. He continued to serve as a Rhode Island priest despite the allegation, until a letter accusing him of sexual abuse at Fatima Hospital surfaced in 2002, according to Journal archives.

The suit says Demers was involved with foreign missions that had been described as “orphanages” or “schools,” but that were in fact known to the diocese as a source of child sexual-abuse victims both within the country and outside the country.

He brought child victims into the country as “sponsored” students and housed them on property supplied by the diocese and its leaders, the suit says. He also shared a child victim with at least one other predator, the suit says.

Demers used parish property to house boys, keeping between three and six with him and “sending back” at least one of them who rebuffed his sexual advances, the suit says.

But when people tried to report Demers' conduct to the diocese, all its leaders did was protect their own, the suit said.

In 1989, for instance, a woman went to Haiti to become the new director of an orphanage and school that Demers had helped establish. She soon became concerned, though, because a teenage boy was sleeping in Demers' room. Once she started working with the boys, she learned he was a "threat" to them.

The boys reported that he used clothes brought from Rhode Island as an excuse to undress and then molest them, the suit says.

She went to the police there, and Demers was arrested and held.

But then-Auxiliary Bishop Kenneth Angell, at the direction of then-Bishop Gelineau, promised the director that if she cooperated in dropping the charges against Demers, he'd be brought back stateside to "face this," the suit alleges.

Based on the promises that Demers would be investigated, prosecuted and punished on his return, she signed a document allowing him to be released.

Demers not only faced no immediate consequences when he came back to Rhode Island, he received a new assignment at St. Martha Church in East Providence in 1990. He denied the allegations when they surfaced in 2002.

Civil litigation has helped expose the extent of past sexual abuse, Houllahan's suit says. But he also takes aim at the diocese and its leaders for more current statements, like the West Warwick priest, the Rev. Richard Bucci, who told WJAR that, unlike abortion, "pedophilia doesn't kill anyone." He later backtracked from those comments, but they're cited in the lawsuit.

Pedophilia can, in fact, be deadly, the suit notes; multiple victims of clergy sexual abuse in Rhode Island and throughout the country have died by suicide.

"The long-term effects of abuse can have generational costs — first in terms of the costs of treatment and injury to the victims, but secondarily in the destruction to the lives of the victim's parents and other childhood family members, and thereafter to the victim's spouses and children," the suit says.

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