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Ruined files spark allegation

Priest says bishop called Springfield diocese 'fortunate'

By Kevin Cullen, Globe Staff, 9/17/2003

EAST LONGMEADOW -- Springfield Bishop Thomas L. Dupre last year said the diocese he heads was "fortunate" because one of his predecessors had destroyed records about priests implicated in the sexual abuse of minors, according to a priest who accuses Dupre of not doing enough to confront the scandal.

In an interview yesterday here at St. Michael's Church, where he is pastor, the Rev. James J. Scahill said Dupre mentioned the destroyed records in front of him and several other priests at a meeting of the diocese's presbyterial council about two months after the sexual abuse scandal exploded in Boston in January 2002.

According to Scahill, Dupre said, "Fortunately for the church of Springfield," the late Bishop Christopher J. Weldon had destroyed "many personal and personnel files."

Weldon died in 1982.

Scahill said that when he confronted Dupre about the remarks in the late autumn of 2002, Dupre denied making them.

Mark Dupont, a spokesman for Dupre, last night said Dupre "absolutely denies saying anything about this as being good for the diocese" and described Scahill's account as "an oversimplification of a complicated conversation."

Dupont said some of Weldon's personal papers were destroyed after he died, but that anything deemed a diocesan record was maintained.

"Father Scahill has exaggerated many facts in Springfield. He is prone to wild speculation," said Dupont.

Scahill said he was willing to make his allegation under oath and said he hoped Dupre would be questioned about it under oath, too.

Last night, a Greenfield attorney, John J. Stobierski, who represents at least 20 people with claims against the diocese, said he would depose both Scahill and Dupre.

"If they have destroyed records, there are serious civil remedies, including a finding of liability," said Stobierski.

Scahill said he decided to go public with his allegation because Superior Court Judge Constance M. Sweeney is scheduled to hold a hearing on Sept. 24 on a motion by the diocese to dismiss five civil cases.

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Diocesan lawyers said the cases refer to acts before 1971, when charities were exempt from such suits.

"Judge Sweeney needs to be aware of this," said Scahill.

Scahill attracted attention last year when he began withholding the 6 percent of his parish's weekly collection that goes to the diocese, in protest over the refusal of Dupre to defrock a priest, Rev. Richard Lavigne, who was convicted of sexually abusing children in 1992.

The Springfield diocese faces about two dozen sexual abuse allegations.

But, unlike Boston, where lawyers uncovered records that showed that church leaders protected abusive priests and covered up their crimes, there has been no similar paper trail in Springfield.

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