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SC bishop says Vatican has cleared him of sexual abuse allegation

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Bishop Robert Guglielmone sings along after a candlelit vigil in support of Dreamers and the DACA program at St. Thomas the Apostle Church on Monday, Jan. 27, 2020, in North Charleston. File/Andrew J. Whitaker/ Staff

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South Carolina's top Roman Catholic priest says the Vatican has cleared him of wrongdoing after he was accused of sexually abusing a boy as the pastor of a New York church in the late 1970s.

In a message to fellow S.C. priests ahead of Sunday's mass, Charleston Bishop Robert Guglielmone wrote that he received a letter "stating that the Vatican has determined that the sexual abuse allegation against me has no semblance of truth and is thus unfounded."

“While not surprising to me, it is very welcomed news as it confirms what I have adamantly stated,” Guglielmone continued. “I am innocent of the accusation that was made against me.”



NEWS

Bishop of Charleston Diocese accused of sexual abuse in new lawsuit from NY

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The announcement comes after an unnamed law firm hired by Guglielmone’s former Catholic diocese investigated the allegations and provided its findings to church leaders in Rome. But those findings haven’t been released publicly, and not everyone is convinced.

The Missouri-based Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests downplayed the priest’s announcement, writing in a statement Monday that the justice system — not the Vatican — should be entrusted with determining the validity of the claims. The network also called on the church to release the law firm’s investigative report for public review.

“We firmly believe that secular courts and law enforcement professionals are better at determining the credibility of accusations than the institutional Catholic Church,” the network wrote.

Guglielmone was installed in March 2009 as the 13th bishop of the Diocese of Charleston, which covers all of South Carolina. He was accused during a flurry of lawsuits filed in New York last year after the state extended its statute of limitations on sexual abuse cases.

One of those lawsuits alleged Guglielmone sexually abused an 8-year-old boy in the late 1970s when he worked as a priest at St. Martin of Tours Catholic Church in Amityville, New York. The lawsuit alleged Guglielmone told the boy the abuse was “God’s will” and that God would reward his children who did what was asked of them. It sought unspecified damages for the “catastrophic and lifelong injuries” caused by the alleged abuse.

Guglielmone strongly denied the accusations. His legal team claimed it had a sworn statement from a family member of the accuser that bolsters their defense.

Guglielmone's lawyers said the accuser admitted to the relative that he made up the allegations in order to get money from the church.

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The lawsuit against Guglielmone remains pending in the New York court system, but cases against that diocese were frozen after it declared bankruptcy in October to shield itself from sexual abuse filings. Court records show 46 lawsuits were filed against Guglielmone's former diocese in New York between June and September 2019.

Efforts to reach attorneys for Guglielmone and the accuser on Monday were not immediately successful.

“The Diocese of Rockville Centre commissioned a comprehensive external investigation of the allegations of misconduct against Bishop Guglielmone by a law firm that is experienced in such matters and had no connection to any of the involved parties,” Michael Acquilano, a spokesman for the Catholic Diocese of Charleston, wrote in a statement Monday. “The results of the investigation were provided to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome pursuant to its request.”

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BY SARA COELLO SCOELLO@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

Acquilano said Charleston church officials do not know the name of the law firm that investigated the matter and haven't seen a copy of the investigative report.

Acquilano would not share the letter Guglielmone received from the Vatican, saying it was sent “personal and confidential.”

A spokesman for the Catholic Diocese of Rockville Centre said the diocese’s internal investigation also concluded that the accusation against Guglielmone was unsubstantiated.

Guglielmone told worshippers about the lawsuit when it was filed last year. He said he would remain in his role but reduce his public presence so he wouldn’t become a distraction.

In his message Friday, Guglielmone thanked S.C. priests for their “encouragement and prayers during this difficult time.”

“Your support helped me tremendously as I waited for the allegation to go through the thorough review process,” he wrote. “I find it appropriate that I am able to announce the conclusion of this canonical matter during the holy season of Advent during which the hope of all God’s children came to be realized by His chosen people in the birth of the Savior.”

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