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Former priest admits guilt Ex-Geneva associate pastor going to prison for sex abuse

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Former priest Mark **Campobello**, the man who gave the Roman Catholic Church's sexual abuse scandal a name and face in Kane County, pleaded guilty to sexual abuse Thursday in a deal that will send him to prison later this month.

Dressed in a black suit with a gray shirt and tie, **Campobello** stood before Kane County Judge Timothy Sheldon and admitted guilt to two counts of aggravated criminal sexual abuse stemming from relationships he had with two teens in 1999 and 2000.

The guilty plea, finalized with prosecutors just after 2 p.m. Thursday, came 11 days before **Campobello**, a former vice principal at Aurora Central Catholic High School and a former associate pastor at St. Peter Catholic Church in Geneva, was to stand trial on the first of two indictments he faced.

Under the terms of the deal, **Campobello**, 39, will be sentenced to eight years in prison - four years for each count - pay court costs and register as a sex offender.

"We thought it was very fair," said Assistant State's Attorney Jody Gleason. "Both victims are very happy with the outcome."

**Campobello** left the courthouse in St. Charles after entering his plea without speaking to reporters. He is scheduled begin his prison sentence May 28.

His attorneys, Van Richards and Paul Gaziano, also declined to comment on the outcome of the case.

Bishop Thomas G. Doran, of the church's Rockford Diocese, offered his sympathies to **Campobello's** victims and said he hopes the wounds inflicted by his actions can heal.

"I wish to first offer my sincere prayers to the victims of Mark **Campobello**," the bishop said in a written statement. "Acts of sexual abuse to minors is an abomination always, and even one instance of such deplorable acts is too many."

Doran said **Campobello's** status as an ordained priest is now in the hands of the Vatican. He has been prohibited from serving as a priest since Dec. 3, 2002, the day he was arrested by Geneva police and then charged with sexual misconduct by Kane County prosecutors.

**Campobello** was arrested in Belvidere and initially charged with five counts of aggravated criminal sexual abuse and five counts of criminal sexual assault. The charges stemmed from incidents that occurred between January and May 1999 involving a student at St. Peter Elementary School who was 14 at the time, Geneva police said. Additional counts of aggravated criminal sexual abuse were added later.

In a case that was being handled separately, **Campobello** was charged in November 2003 with three counts of criminal sexual abuse after a second girl came forward claiming **Campobello** improperly touched her while she was a student at Aurora Central Catholic between November 1999 and March 2000. The girl, who was 16 and 17 at the time of the abuse, contacted prosecutors following media reports of the initial charges.

Two young women accompanied by employees of the Kane County victim's advocacy center attended Thursday's court hearing but quickly left after the proceedings ended. Prosecutors would not confirm or deny if the two women were **Campobello's** victims.

Barbara Blaine, president of the Chicago-based victim's rights group Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, applauded the victims of **Campobello** for coming forward and praised the state's attorney's office for pursuing the prosecutions.

"I hope that it brings some level of closure and vindication for the victims and their family members," she said. "It's a victory for the innocent children of Illinois who will be protected from this man who will now have to disclose his name on the list of sex offenders."

Gleason echoed those statements thanking the victims for contacting police.

"These are two very serious cases, and we appreciate the courage it took for these two young women to come forward," Gleason said. "This office is committed to pursuing justice for victims of sexual abuse, and we believe this guilty plea today represents justice."

Geneva police Lt. Joe Frega said he hopes Thursday's plea gives closure to the family, while a spokeswoman for St. Peter said the church "continues to pray for God's healing for all who were impacted."

Despite the resolution of the criminal charges against **Campobello**, a potentially precedent-setting legal case involving his actions remains unresolved before the state's 2nd District Appellate Court.

Throughout the investigation into the abuse allegations against **Campobello**, the church's Rockford Diocese has been fighting to keep internal church records secret.

When ordered to hand over internal records by Kane County Judge Sheldon, the diocese and its lawyers refused. Sheldon ruled that the diocese was in contempt of court, and the church appealed.

Oral arguments in that appeal were heard last week, and the appellate justices have not yet published their decision. The diocese argued the internal records are protected under the freedom of religion clause in the Constitution.

Gleason said the Kane County state's attorney's office will continue to press that case as a matter of public policy.

It's a case Blaine and other victims groups don't want to see dismissed or set aside just because the criminal case against **Campobello** is resolved.

"We would appreciate and applaud the effort of the (state's attorney) to pursue justice and a ruling in this case," Blaine said. "It's our contention that when the framers of the Constitution were making the effort to protect religious freedom we don't believe it was intended to cover up and conceal sexual abuse of children."

- Daily Herald staff writer Garrett Ordower contributed to this report.

GRAPHIC: Bishop's statement

"I wish to first offer my sincere prayers to the victims of Mark **Campobello**. Acts of sexual abuse to minors is an abomination always, and even one instance of such deplorable acts is too many. I am relieved that this case has come to a resolution, and it is my fervent hope that we can now direct our focus on healing the wounds caused by such abhorrent behavior and working to ensure that such gravely sinful acts never occur again in our Catholic family."

Bishop Thomas G. Doran

Roman Catholic Church, Diocese of Rockford