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Local News

Priest, diocese sued for abuse

▪ One of the women at the center of Mark Campobello's case wants more than \$50,000.

By GERI NIKOLAI, *Rockford Register Star*

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A woman who was sexually abused by a priest in 1999 when she was 14 is suing the Catholic Diocese of Rockford for negligence.

The Geneva woman, 19, also is suing the priest, Mark Campobello, who began serving an eight-year prison term last month after pleading guilty to abusing her and another teenage girl.

The suit, filed Wednesday in Kane County Court, accuses the diocese of negligence for failing to evaluate Campobello's suitability for interaction with adolescents. At the time of the abuse in 1999-2000, Campobello was assistant principal and spiritual director at Aurora Catholic High School and a priest at St. Peter Church in Geneva.

The suit says Campobello became a friend of the victim's father and was invited to family gatherings and vacation trips with the family beginning in 1994 when the girl was about 10.

"In his capacity as priest, Campobello became a special spiritual confidant of plaintiff, enabling him to gain intimate knowledge of plaintiff's adolescent hopes, fears and yearnings," the lawsuit states.

In 1999 Campobello "exploited and perverted the position of trust" by persuading the victim to let him kiss her and sexually fondle her. The complaint says the abuse occurred from January to April 1999 in the victim's home and at the rectory of St. Peter Church in Geneva.

The woman is seeking more than \$50,000 from Campobello and the diocese.

What's next

- The complaint will officially be given to the Catholic Diocese of Rockford and Mark Campobello. That's expected within a few days.
- The diocese and Campobello have 30 days after receiving the papers to admit to or deny the charges. The diocese is represented by Hinshaw & Culbertson. It is unknown who is representing Campobello.
- If either party denies the charges, lawyers for the plaintiffs begin gathering evidence to support their case. That would include statements and documents.
- The case could go to trial or be dropped, or the diocese or Campobello could come to a settlement with the plaintiffs.

The diocese had not been served with the lawsuit as of noon Wednesday and had no comment, said attorney Ellen Lynch of Hinshaw & Culbertson. Bishop Thomas Doran is in Denver this week for a meeting of U.S. bishops.

Attorney Keith M. Aeschliman of Joliet, who filed the suit on behalf of the young woman, said he will file a similar complaint for the other Campobello victim within days. Campobello was charged with abusing the second woman when she was 15, between November 1999 and March 2000.

The diocese and Campobello have 30 days from when they officially receive the complaint to respond. If they declare themselves not guilty, Aeschliman's office begins the process of discovery, or gathering statements and documents to support his case.

Aeschliman said he will go after personnel documents on Campobello that the diocese refused to turn over to Kane County during pretrial deliberations on the Campobello case. An appeals court ruled for Kane County and will issue a mandate Friday that the paperwork must be given to Judge Timothy Sheldon, who presided over the case.

However, because Campobello pleaded guilty before a trial began, the records are unlikely to become part of a public record.

Aeschliman said he will ask the diocese not only for Campobello files but for information on other priests who are known or alleged to have committed sexual abuse. His intent is to examine the diocesan pattern in dealing with those cases, he said.

In a cover letter he faxed to the Rockford Register Star, Aeschliman said the discovery process will let the public "learn the truth about who knew what and when."

Open discussion in court during pretrial hearings for Campobello raised the question of whether he had received mental health treatment. Prosecutors asked for records on whether he had been treated at St. Luke's facility in Maryland, where the Catholic Church sent many priests who were involved in sexual abuse cases.

The diocese has never said whether Campobello was at St. Luke's. However, there is an eight-month gap after his time in Aurora and Geneva, from February to October 2000, when he had no assignment from the diocese, Lynch said.

After that, Campobello served churches in Crystal Lake and was sent to St. James Church in Belvidere in June 2001. He was still


at St. James when he was arrested in December 2002 and relieved of all priestly duties by the diocese.

Campobello was ordained in 1991 and served at Holy Family in Rockford from then until 1994, when he went to Geneva. In 1995-96, he was at the Cathedral of St. Peter in Rockford while preparing for studies in Rome, but that plan never materialized, Lynch said.

Because of his conviction, the diocese is sending his case to the Vatican to determine whether he should be expelled from the priesthood.

Campobello, who will be eligible to ask for parole in May 2008, is at the Illinois River state prison in Canton.

Contact: gnikolai@registerstartower.com; 815-987-1337

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