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## Crookston diocese releases list of accused priests

By [Stephen J. Lee](#) on Jan 24, 2014 at 8:31 p.m.

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The Catholic Diocese of Crookston on Friday released a list of six priests who had credible accusations of sexual abuse made against them in the past.

Five the priests are dead and their alleged abuse occurred decades ago.

The sixth, the Rev. Joseph Jeyapaul, remains awaiting extradition from his home country of India, to face charges in Roseau County he sexually assaulted two girls, 14 and 16, a decade ago while serving as a visiting priest to the diocese for about three years.

The release of the list came after a request from the Herald.

And it doesn't contain new material, since the names have been available for several years in court documents and have been mentioned in news stories

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over the years.

It is a significant change in policy for the diocese. As recently as October, an attorney for the Crookston diocese argued against litigation by St. Paul attorney Jeffrey Anderson seeking such a list, that there was no harm in keeping private such a list of priests accused of sexual abuse.

Three other dioceses in Minnesota, including the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, are releasing similar lists under orders from a judge, including a kind of expanded list of any priest accused of such behavior, even if the diocese has not yet determined the accusation to be credible.

Monsignor David Baumgartner, vicar general of the Crookston diocese, emailed the list Friday to the Herald, along with comments.

“In keeping with our strong desire to help any victims of sexual abuse and to encourage any undisclosed victims to come forward, we are posting the names of priests against whom credible accusations of abuse have been made in the past. These names have already been made public through the legal process,” he wrote.

### **Priests named**

The list includes James Porter, considered perhaps the worst known sex abuser among clergy in recent memory, with more than 100 alleged victims, mostly in Massachusetts. He served little more than a year in the Crookston diocese 40 years ago while undergoing treatment and abused several boys and girls in Bemidji.

It also includes Vincent Fitzgerald, who died as a retired priest at 89 in 2009, but about whom allegations became public only last fall.

In a lawsuit filed in November against the Crookston diocese, a Twin Cities man

in his 30s claimed Fitzgerald sexually abused him in the mid-1980s on the White Earth Indian Reservation. The man, whose identity was not revealed, is represented by Anderson, the St. Paul attorney who has won hundreds of millions of dollars in lawsuits against Catholic dioceses and parishes nationwide.

Baumgartner said until that lawsuit, the diocese knew nothing of any allegations against Fitzgerald, who belonged to a religious order and was not a diocesan priest, but worked for several years in the diocese decades ago.

“I’m not aware of any additional allegations against these men or any other individuals associated with the diocese,” Baumgartner said. As vicar general, he speaks for Bishop Michael Hoepfner, especially regarding clergy matters.

“To any victims of these men I would say that we are saddened and sorrowful for the terrible harm done to you by men placed in a position of trust,” Baumgartner said. “We pray for your forgiveness and that you may find comfort and healing through God’s grace. We want to see justice done for you and for any others who may have suffered similar injuries.”

## **New steps**

Baumgartner told the Herald recently that the diocese took a new step last year, hiring Jon Austin, a public relations expert in the Twin Cities, to help deal with the issue.

“We decided to work with Jon because he has a great deal of experience in helping organizations communicate clearly on issues of sensitivity and because we don’t have a full-time communications staff,” Baumgartner said. “I also think we benefit from his ‘outside’ perspective.”

The Crookston diocese took the stance of releasing a list it wasn’t required to do as part of an effort to respond better to allegations about priests. As part of a lawsuit settled with Megan Peterson, one of Jeyapaul’s alleged victims, the

Crookston diocese has kept on its website, at [www.crookston.org](http://www.crookston.org), a notice about the priest, with information on who to contact with questions or reports.

Asked for a similar list, Aliceyn Megalka, communications director for the Catholic Diocese of Fargo, declined to issue one, saying there is no legal requirement and because it involves confidential personnel information.

In a written statement Friday, Megalka said Bishop John Folda, when appointed last spring to head the Fargo diocese, “reaffirmed his commitment to promptly comply with the child abuse reporting laws of the state of North Dakota and with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People adopted more than 10 years ago by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.”

She said Folda “has confirmed that no priest who has been credibly accused of wrongdoing toward a child is or ever will be in ministry. For decades, the Diocese of Fargo has maintained carefully all its personnel records. Like all personnel records, lay or cleric, these files are deemed confidential and will not be released.”

The statement does not address the names of priests who in the past had credible accusations of sexual abuse of children.

But Folda’s predecessor as bishop in Fargo, Samuel Aquila who now is Archbishop of Denver, did speak about the diocese’s record of priests accused of abuse.

In 2003, Aquila wrote in his column in the diocesan monthly, *The New Earth*, that between 1950 and July 31, 2003, a total of 693 priests and deacons served in the diocese that covers eastern North Dakota. “Of those, 17 priests and deacons have had allegations of sexual misconduct with minors brought against them. Of the 17, 12 of the clergy belonged to the diocese; the other five were religious order priests or priests from other dioceses. This is about 2.5 percent of the clergy who have served in the diocese over the past half century.”

Four of the 17 were dead and 13 no longer were in active ministry, Aquila said in late 2003.

As in most cases, the abuse happened decades ago.

“Crimes of abuse are abhorrent and contrary to the fundamental principles of our Church,” Baumgartner said in his written comments. “We strongly encourage anyone who has been the victim of abuse or who knows of such circumstances to report that information to their local law enforcement officials and to the diocese’s victim’s assistance coordinator so that any allegation can be investigated and appropriate action can be taken.”

The list released by Baumgartner on Friday includes biographical information about the priests, and where and when they served in the Crookston diocese. It is available on the diocese’s website and at <http://bit.ly/1d1zxoF>.

A PDF of the list can be viewed [here](#).

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