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Yonkers parishioners demand priest's return

By **GARY STERN**
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YONKERS — The cross that is supposed to rest atop St. John the Baptist Church lies in pieces on the front lawn. A web of scaffolding around the church makes the building look weak and fragile, like the stone walls may crumble at any time.

The Roman Catholic church is still ailing from an August encounter with lightning. But its condition could reflect a deeper trauma that has afflicted the parish since April, when St. John's longtime pastor, the Rev. John Lennon, was unexpectedly taken away.

Lennon was one of six priests removed from their assignments by the Archdiocese of New York so church officials could clear up old accusations of sexual abuse against the priests. Parishioners at St. John the Baptist, stunned, believed the matter would be dealt with quickly and their pastor returned.

After all, the archdiocese investigated an allegation against Lennon in 1998 and cleared him.

Nine months later, there is no news. The archdiocese, as required by the Catholic Church's new national policy on sex abuse, has appointed a review board to study its abuse cases and make recommendations to Cardinal Edward Egan, archbishop of New York.

But parish leaders at St. John the Baptist are tired of waiting.

Vincent Vanadia, president of the parish council, is leading a minor parish insurrection, demanding Lennon's name be cleared. On recent Sundays, he has inserted into the parish bulletin open letters critical of the archdiocese's treatment of Lennon.

On Monday, the parish council decided it would not celebrate the church's 100th anniversary this year unless Lennon is part of it.

"Celebrating the anniversary without Father Lennon would be like going to his funeral," Vanadia said. "Here's the thing: If the church had something on him, why haven't they acted by now? If they don't have anything on him, then shame on them for disgracing this man."

Lennon, who turns 75 on Jan. 20, wrote a letter to Egan last month in which he maintained his innocence and insisted on being returned to his parish by Christmas. But he remains at a home in Maine, where he has stayed since his suspension.

For Catholic dioceses across the country that are trying to diffuse the church's sex-abuse scandal, putting to rest old accusations against priests, some going back decades, has proven to be a trying experience. The process often requires reconstructing long-ago events, and pits the word of the accused against the word of his accuser.

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The main accuser in Lennon's case, for instance, met last month with archdiocesan lawyer James McCabe, unbeknownst to parishioners at St. John the Baptist.

The accuser, now 44, described to the lawyer how he met Lennon in the mid-1970s at Cardinal Hayes High School in the Bronx, where Lennon was in charge of athletics and his accuser played on the hockey team. The man alleged that, starting in his sophomore year, Lennon took him on weekend trips to a home in Maine, where the priest fondled him. The Journal News is withholding the name of the man and his mother because they did not want to be identified.

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Lennon's accuser and the man's mother told The Journal News that the archdiocese has agreed to pay for the accuser's therapy. The man said he has battled drug addiction since high school and has been jailed several times for grand theft.

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"I told Mr. McCabe that Father Lennon betrayed all of us," said the man's mother, who also said that her other eight children are well-adjusted adults. "My son was a good boy until this happened. Father Lennon took him away on weekends, and I was so stupid to let this happen. My son looked at this priest as a god and didn't understand what was happening to him."

McCabe's office referred questions to Joseph Zwilling, spokesman for the archdiocese, who would not comment on developments in Lennon's case. He said the archdiocesan advisory board will study each outstanding allegation, and that Egan will make the final decision on each priest's fate.

OPINION

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"In general terms, offering therapy to a person who has brought allegations is something we have done in the past and is an option available to us," Zwilling said. "That does not mean we have made any determination on the validity of an allegation, but is something that we might do out of pastoral concern for an individual."

The situation at St. John the Baptist Church is particularly awkward because the priest sent in to replace Lennon, Monsignor Edward O'Donnell, is the man who led an investigation of Lennon in 1998 — and cleared him. O'Donnell, the archdiocese's former head of priest personnel, told parishioners when he arrived in April that Lennon was innocent and would be back quickly. Now he says he does not know what to make of Lennon's long absence.

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"When parishioners ask, I tell them that I simply don't know," O'Donnell said.

Lennon's alleged victim said the archdiocese learned of his accusations in 1997, when a priest friend contacted church officials. He said he never learned the outcome of the archdiocese's investigation and was surprised to learn his mother was contacted weeks ago by McCabe, who wanted to reopen the case. He said McCabe visited his home in Georgia last month.

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The man, who said he started seeing a therapist last week, attributes his drug addiction, marriage problems and difficulties holding a job to two years of abuse by Lennon.

"At the time, I thought Lennon really cared about me," the priest's accuser said. "I didn't know if it was right or wrong, if I was supposed to do it. I started to drink heavily. Even now, I don't feel like I belong anywhere."

The accuser's identity is well known in the St. John the Baptist community, where many people have looked into the case. Some people question the accuser's credibility, contending he had disagreements with Lennon over his role on the hockey team. Some also say the man, who was 19 when he graduated from Hayes in 1977, was no longer a minor when he knew Lennon.

Most of Lennon's supporters, though, in hundreds of letters to the archdiocese, have focused on Lennon's contributions to the parish since his arrival in 1989.

"Any individual with a sense of loyalty or gratitude would find it difficult to imagine the parish without Father Lennon," said Andrew Bauer, the parish's music director. "I believe the allegation

against him is baseless. But I don't know what the cardinal is going through. He faces tremendous challenges and is under a lot of pressure."

Lennon's lawyer, Andrew Natale of Yonkers, reviewed Lennon's file in July and said he saw no evidence of wrongdoing. In addition to the allegation from the 1970s, there was a second vague accusation, but no details or proof supporting either, he said. Natale declined to have his client be interviewed by The Journal News.

It is also unclear whether any law enforcement officials are investigating Lennon's case. An official in the Bronx District Attorney's Office wrote in a May letter to a Yonkers parishioner that the office was not involved because the alleged abuse took place outside the Bronx. A spokesperson for the district attorney in Cumberland County, Maine, where Lennon's accuser contends he was abused, said last week the office had not been contacted about the case.

Natale said he awaits a chance to defend Lennon, but cannot get answers from the archdiocese. "You write letters and no one responds," Natale said. "What's going to happen to this priest?"

Send e-mail to Gary Stern



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