Verdict Splits St. Odilo Parish

By Scott Fornek and Adrienne Drell
Staff Writers

The conviction Friday of a former Brooklyn priest, Robert E. Mayer, of sexual abuse has left St. Odilo Roman Catholic Church a divided house ...

Anita Stenske, the mother of a 15-year-old son at St. Odilo School, said, "I send my children there to get help from them, not to be hurt.”

Linda Smith, 43, said, "I don’t think he did it. It’s too preposterous. It’s too ridiculous. The girl’s whole story doesn’t make sense.

Another woman from the parish, whom other church members identified as a friend of Mayer’s, would not comment.

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...the little girl and her family, Father Mayer and all the people in our parish who have been hurt by abuse," he said.

Some parishioners have declined comment on, or others voiced anger, either at Mayer or over his ordeal.

Sister Margaret Campbell, a nun who identified herself as a house representative at the St. Odilo convent, said she feels for what the controversy has done to the people of the parish and for all priests.

"It’s happened, it’s probably the fairest way of handling it," she said. "But I feel bad.

Another woman, who declined to identify herself, said, "I think he gets what he deserved.

Others, looking weary and resigned, would say only, "It’s over.

The church has been split, but Conley said he was confident that the parish would emerge from its ordeal a stronger, more united entity.

"We will heal," he said.

Archdiocese Reaction to Conviction

The following statement was issued by the Archbishop of Chicago Friday after Rev. Robert E. Mayer was found guilty of sexually abusing a minor.

We understand there are names and events today concerning the matter of Father Robert E. Mayer, a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago who has been found guilty of the charge of sexual abuse of a minor.

This is a personal tragedy for this young girl, for her family, for her classmates and teachers, for the people of St. Odilo Parish, for Father Mayer himself and for the archdiocese. Our thoughts and prayers go out to all of those who have been hurt by these events.

Father Mayer resigned as pastor of St. Odilo parish on July 1, 1991, and shortly thereafter the archbishop decided that he would not give him a ministerial assignment in the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Father Mayer remains on administrative leave under continued archdiocesan supervision, pending the outcome of the court’s disposition of this case.

How Sexual Abuse Allegations Are Handled

Q: How widespread is sexual abuse by priests in the Archdiocese of Chicago?

A: The extent of such misconduct was clouded for years by the refusal of church officials to specifically address the issue. The long-simmering scandal boiled over in public debate with the conviction Friday of the Rev. Robert E. Mayer on sexual abuse charges brought in July, 1991.

Q: What has happened since then?

A: Joseph Cardinal Bernardin appointed a commission on sexual abuse. Twenty-five priests have been removed from their parishes because of alleged sexual abuse.

Q: What did the commission do?

A: It called for a nine-member independent review board to consider charges of sexual abuse of children by priests. The board will consist of three priests and six lay people with no role in archdiocesan institutions, one of whom is either a victim or a member of a victim’s family.

Q: What happens if the board decides a priest is guilty?

A: The priest will never again be assigned to parish work. He will be eligible for any kind of reassignment only after six years of therapy and supervision.

Q: What other action might the church take?

A: The ultimate penalty for a Roman Catholic cleric convicted of a crime is dismissal from the priesthood.

Q: What if a priest admits guilt and expresses remorse?

A: Bishop Adolphe H. Bourgeois of Green Bay, Wis., wrote in the Catholic Lawyer that "when a priest expresses sorrow, it denotes the process. If he seeks reconciliation, in canon law we may give him absolution and say, ‘Sin no more.’

Q: What about criminal charges?

A: Bernardin has pledged that the archdiocese will cooperate in any civil actions in which the victims of sexual abuse allegations before it starts its own investigations.

Q: What is the status of the 22 priests removed from their parishes?

A: They are being housed in Roman Catholic facilities in the archdiocese. Movements of some are said to be strictly monitored while others reportedly are free to roam.