

The New York Times

They Quietly Left the Church, but the Sexual Abuse Continued

By Sharon Otterman

Nov. 10, 2017

After leaving active ministry in 2002 as a priest in Brooklyn, Stephen Placa got his pilot's license and founded a flight school in Ronkonkoma, Long Island, the Heritage Flight Academy. Seven years later, he was convicted in Suffolk County of the sexual abuse of two boys, ages 8 and 10.

In 1987, the Rev. Thomas O. Morrow went on an indefinite leave of absence from the Diocese of Brooklyn and began working as a psychologist in Forest Hills. He was still officially a priest when he was indicted in 1996 on charges that he sodomized a 15-year-old boy he was hired to counsel, took nude photographs of him and gave him crack to smoke. The diocese said at the time it had never gotten any complaints of abuse. Eventually, it defrocked him.

The two men are among the eight priests who the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn revealed on Thursday had been laicized, or defrocked, by the Vatican for the sexual abuse of children since 2002. Of those eight, four went on to be arrested and convicted on child sex abuse charges after they left active ministry in Brooklyn. The other four do not appear to have been arrested, though whether they reoffended is unknown.

The public disclosure of eight of the likely dozens of priests who have sexually abused children in the Brooklyn diocese over the decades was met with a mixture of praise and frustration from victims and their advocates on Friday. While they were gratified that the disclosures would probably protect additional children, they noted that this was nowhere near a full accounting of clergy sex abuse in the diocese.

"I'm encouraged by the release of eight names — I do think it's good," said Michael Reck, a lawyer who is representing two of the victims of Romano J. Ferraro, among the eight former priests named on Thursday. "But this is a trickle compared to the flood that they are holding back."

Carolyn Erstad, a spokeswoman for the diocese, said Friday that it had chosen to release the names of living priests who had been formally defrocked by the Vatican because they could still be a danger to children. She said it was not releasing the names of dead priests who had been defrocked because they were no longer a threat.

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She did not address why the diocese was withholding the names of abusers who had been named by victims in successful abuse settlements, but who had not been formally laicized. Not all abusive priests are laicized; that process at the Vatican is long and does not always result in the loss of a clerical state.

“This is about releasing the names of people who may have access to children,” she said, adding that the diocese anticipated more names would be added to the list next week.

She noted that the diocese now routinely shares all allegations of abuse with law enforcement, and that it had done so since 2002, when reforms were passed nationally in the Roman Catholic Church to protect children. Before that, it was common to withhold allegations of abuse from law enforcement. She also noted that the diocese had previously publicly acknowledged substantiated allegations against priests.

Of the eight men named Thursday, the most notorious was Mr. Ferraro, who is believed to have been one of the most prolific priest pedophiles on the Eastern Seaboard, and one of whom the most is known.

His past in the church was divulged by the Diocese of Brooklyn, which, after a four-year battle, was required to disclose some 1,200 pages of information from his personnel file for a civil suit in Miami relating to his abuse of a boy in Key West in 1969. The papers show that church officials in Brooklyn knew as early as 1973 that he had abused boys, and that they helped him to get jobs in other dioceses around the country when they no longer wanted him in Brooklyn. He was said to have revealed his attraction to young boys in the seminary.

In 1981, Anthony Bevilacqua, then a high-ranking Brooklyn chancery official, who later became the cardinal archbishop of Philadelphia, facilitated Mr. Ferraro’s move to a Missouri parish, where he was later accused of molesting children. He also allegedly abused boys in the dioceses of Rockville Centre and Metuchen, N.J.

He was formally removed from ministry in 1988, and in 2004, was convicted of child sexual assault for raping a Massachusetts boy in the 1970s. He is now serving a life sentence in a medium-security prison in Bridgewater, Mass. Throughout his career, from 1960 to 1988, he was officially a priest of the Diocese of Brooklyn.

Although the diocese identified the eight former priests, it is impossible to know in most of the cases when the diocese knew about the abuse and what it did about it. The church’s brief statement only says what years they served as active priests, and not when the laicizations

took place, or when the first allegations came in.

Of the priests, several had never been publicly named as sex abusers, including James Lara, who lost his job as a professor at Arizona State University on Thursday after his name was posted.

Charles M. Mangini went on to live in Old Bridge, N.J. after his removal from ministry in 1993. Reached at home on Thursday, the 79-year-old affirmed in a cheery voice that he had been a priest in Brooklyn. He quickly changed his tone when told why the diocese had just posted his name.

Christopher Lee Coleman, now 61, who was removed from ministry in 2011, still maintains a Facebook page, and a LinkedIn page that makes it seem as if he is a priest. “I live a vowed life. Ordained 21 May 1994, Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn,” it says.

The LinkedIn page says he got a doctorate in sociology from the CUNY Graduate Center, and since 2013 he has been a hermit and counselor, at the Hermitage of Peace. His address is given as the Queen of All Saints Church in Fort Greene, Brooklyn.

Anthony Hughes, 42, a clergy sex abuse victim from the diocese who regularly participates in activities it holds for abuse survivors, said Friday that it was a “fabulous idea” that the names were being released, and that he hoped there would be more. When told that the diocese was not planning on releasing the names of deceased priests, he then volunteered the name of the deceased priest who abused him.

“Father Robert Titone,” he said, “at St. Anthony - St. Alphonsus in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.” Mr. Hughes, who recently received a settlement for the abuse, said he was 11 when the abuse started and from a poor family. He recalled the priest as generous. “He was the greatest thing since sliced bread,” Mr. Hughes said, “and then the sickness came out in him.”

A version of this article appears in print on Nov. 10, 2017, on Page A18 of the New York edition with the headline: Defrocked Priests Quietly Left Brooklyn, but the Child Sex Abuse Continued