

Diocese, state police confirm complaint about priest abuse from former university president

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PROVIDENCE — The Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence on Wednesday acknowledged having received a complaint in 2012 from former Lesley University President Margaret McKenna about a priest who had touched her under her clothing multiple times when she was growing up in Central Falls.

McKenna, who also served as a deputy White House counsel in the Carter administration, later told the state police that Bishop Thomas Tobin treated her “as if she were a suspect, rather than a victim.”

Names and dates are blacked out in the heavily redacted copy of a letter the diocese provided The Journal, to show that it had notified then-state police Detective Commander Michael J. Winquist of the unnamed woman’s allegations.

In response to inquiries about the account that McKenna, who is now 73, gave the Senate Judiciary Committee at a televised public hearing Tuesday night, diocesan spokeswoman Carolyn Cronin issued this statement:

“In October 2012, Ms. McKenna contacted the Diocesan Office of Education and Compliance to allege she was abused by Father Peter L. Tedeschi, 54 years earlier, in 1958. The allegation was promptly reported by the diocese to law enforcement. Father Tedeschi died in 1986 and because he predeceased the allegation, could not be interviewed or given an opportunity to respond to the allegation.”

“Ms. McKenna’s claim is the only allegation made against Father Tedeschi.”

Similarly, the Rhode Island State Police confirmed its brief involvement. “We can confirm that the Diocese of Providence contacted the RI State Police on February 4, 2013, regarding a complaint filed by a woman named Margaret McKenna. No criminal charges were brought, so the case was closed. We can’t comment beyond that.”

A narrative of the Sept. 29, 2014 state police interview with McKenna — obtained by The Journal through a public records request — said her “primary complaint [at that point] is that she was so mistreated as a victim [that] she is concerned that the behavior of the Diocese of Providence has been deterring other victims to come forward and feel safe about their disclosures.”

Tuesday night, in telling her story for the first time publicly, McKenna identified Tedeschi, who died at age 55, as the man who abused her.

Over the course of his career in Rhode Island, Tedeschi served at Holy Trinity Church, in Central Falls; Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish, in Providence; St. Alexander’s Parish, in Warren; St. Ann’s Parish, in Providence; St. Anthony’s Parish, in Woonsocket; and St. Mary’s Parish, in Cranston, according to his obituary.

“We lived across the street from Holy Trinity ... from the school, the convent and the rectory, and I was abused by Peter Tedeschi when I was a middle school student for over year, in the sanctuary, in the rectory, in his car, in school hallways, and this continued not only when he was at Holy Trinity, it continued after he left Holy Trinity when he went to another parish and he followed me to Sacred Heart High School,” McKenna said Tuesday.

“Like other people in this situation, I grew up in an Irish Catholic family where the church was God, and priests were God ... and the idea that you would question a priest and what he was doing was absolutely beyond the pale. You would never, ever consider it.” And, she said, he told her: “If you tell anybody, no one will believe you. You will ruin yourself. You will ruin your family.”

At age 15, she said, she told her story to another priest during confession.

“And he said to me: ‘Promise me through the confessional you will never tell another soul and you will pray for Father Tedeschi.’ That was the response.... The priest in the confessional [also] told me: ‘Young girls tempt young priests.’ I was 12. I had never been kissed. I had never been on a date.”

She said that at age 22, when she was a law student at Boston College, she “went to see Peter Tedeschi face to face ... and confronted him. He admitted what he did ... and I said to him, ‘I want to know who else you have done this to’ ... He said: ‘I can’t help it, I am just attracted to young girls.’

“I was horrified,” she said. “Here was a guy who was still doing this.... I was now 22 years old at Boston College [so] he’s been doing this at least for 10 years. ... I called the Rhode Island Diocese and reported this. Now, I reported it anonymously. ... I wasn’t ready to step out. But I did report it.

“So I had now told it in confession to a priest. I called the Diocese and reported it.... Here’s where he is. Here’s what happened to me ... [and] he told me he is still continuing to do this.”

In 1976, McKenna ran Jimmy Carter’s presidential campaign in Rhode Island. She did a stint as deputy counsel to the president, and later, as an undersecretary in the Department of Education. In 1986, then-Gov. Edward D. DiPrete signed a proclamation declaring Jan. 19, 1986, as “Margaret A. McKenna Day,” to commemorate her appointment as president of Lesley University.

Sometime between 2012 and 2014, McKenna decided to report her story to authorities.

The diocese was promising to look into and alert state police to allegations of clergy sex abuse.

“I have never, ever wanted to sue the Diocese of Rhode Island,” McKenna said. “I am a lawyer, I worked in the White House, I ran a university, I’ve always had access to the funds to go through therapy which I have now been in ... on and off for 50 years, trying to deal with this.”

She said she talked on the phone with Robert McCarthy, the retired Massachusetts state police officer investigating abuse complaints for the diocese, and he “berated” her.

She then met with Bishop Tobin, who “said to me, and I quote: ‘If after 50 years, an apology would make a difference, I apologize.’ ... That was it. He was arrogant. He lacked empathy. He was self-righteous. He offered me a lecture on church theology.” (The diocese has not disputed her account.)

With reports from staff writer Amanda Milkovits