

Community college says 'credibly accused' former R.I. priest no longer works there

By Kiernan Dunlop / The Standard-Times (New Bedford)

Posted Aug 30, 2019 at 12:01 AM

Updated Aug 30, 2019 at 2:11 PM

FALL RIVER — Bristol Community College has informed students that a former faculty member whose name was included in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence's list of clergy "credibly accused" of sexually abusing minors no longer works there.

On Aug. 22, the president of the college, Laura Douglas, sent an email to students alerting them to the existence of the list and announcing, "Included in the list was former Bristol Community College faculty member John Tormey, who is no longer employed by the college."

The email went on to say, "Unfortunately, there was no way that the college could have been aware of this allegation, which dates back to 1979, prior to the disclosure being published by the Diocese in the media. When information such as this comes to the college's attention, it is our duty to address the matter immediately and be as transparent as possible."

The email does not specify whether Tormey resigned, was fired, or retired.

Spokesman Kevin Spirlet said the college had shared all the information it could in the email and additional information could not be provided due to the college's employee privacy policy.

He said that when the diocese published the list on July 1, the college began to address the situation immediately.

The college website lists Tormey, 77, as program director of thanatology, gerontology and funeral services, and professor of psychology.

The college recognized Tormey for 40 years of service at a breakfast on May 11, 2018, according to an event description available on its website.

According to the list from the Providence Diocese, Tormey was ordained as a priest in 1967 and resigned from ministry on March 2, 1979. The list says the allegation against him was received after his resignation.

Reached Thursday, Tormey, who lives in East Providence, denied that he has ever sexually abused anyone.

“Never,” he said. “Honest to God.”

Tormey said he was not told of the allegation until April of this year, despite a complainant coming forward to the diocese’s compliance office in 2003. In the intervening years, he now has lost the ability to marshal some witnesses and evidence, he said.

“In 2003, that was the time to defend myself,” he said.

Tormey said college officials approached him after the diocese’s list came out and encouraged him to retire. After 42 years there, he decided to do so. In the wake of the announcement of his departure, Tormey sent a note defending himself, and received supportive emails and notes from colleagues and former students.

During his time as a priest, Tormey was assigned to two schools, St. Mary Academy-Bay View in East Providence from 1970 to 1973, after which he took a five-month sabbatical, and the now-closed St. Xavier Academy in Providence from 1974 to 1979.

The Standard-Times reached out to Bay View for comment but had not heard back Thursday.

In addition to the schools, Tormey was assigned to Our Lady of Fatima Hospital in Providence for the summer of 1967, St. Margaret Church in Rumford from 1967 to 1973 (which has an associated school serving Pre-K through grade 8 students), Blessed Sacrament Church in Providence for the summer of 1973, St. Maria Goretti Church in Pawtucket from 1973 to 1974, and St. Joseph Hospital in Providence from 1974 to 1979.

During this time a John C. Tormey published multiple books, including “Priests are only human” in 1973 and “Emotional child abuse” in 1979.

A 2002 story in The Providence Journal reported that Tormey was a grief counselor and chaplain to the East Providence Police and Fire Departments.

A spokeswoman for the city, Patricia Resende, said the Police Department “hasn’t used Chaplain Tormey since the early 2000s. And Chaplain Tormey’s services were only used once or twice.”

She said Thursday that Tormey had not actually served as a chaplain for the Fire Department; Tormey insisted that he had, and provided a photograph of a badge from the Fire Department showing he served in that role from 1970 to 1977.

Presented with the photograph Friday, the city said Tormey had in fact “assisted the department with non-ecumenical services that were held. He basically provided moral support.”

The allegations against Tormey had not been reported before the release by the diocese of the list of “credibly accused” clergy.

The diocese declined to comment on the allegation against Tormey.

In July, Goodwill of Southern New England fired Kevin R. Fisette after his name was included on the list of credibly accused priests. Fisette had been removed from ministry in 2009 after an allegation from the early 1980s surfaced. The Diocese of Providence publicly announced his removal from ministry and his resignation from a Pawtucket parish at the time, which was reported in The Providence Journal.

Fisette got a job at Goodwill of Rhode Island a year later. In that job, he visited Rhode Island schools and was often in the presence of children. Several school officials said they were unaware of his past and wouldn’t have allowed him on campus had they been aware of the 2009 allegation.

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