

Introduction

42.1 Fr Sergius ministered in the Archdiocese in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. He is now retired. There have been numerous complaints lodged with the Archdiocese about him. These include complaints of child sexual abuse, sexual violence and physical and emotional abuse of minors.

42.2 In 1993, the Archdiocese received a complaint that Fr Sergius had been violent towards an adult woman and threatened her with rape. This was investigated by the Archdiocese. It emerged that he and the woman had had a sexual relationship in the late 1980s. She alleged that he had become abusive and threatening towards her after the relationship ended. He told the Archdiocese that he was now committed to the priesthood and that he did not need help or treatment.

Complaint, 1995

42.3 The first complaint of sexually abusive behaviour towards a minor was made to the Gardaí in October 1995. A 17-year-old girl and a 15-year-old girl who were working in a restaurant alleged that Fr Sergius had sexually harassed them in the restaurant. They said he had touched their legs and abused them as they walked by.

42.4 Fr Sergius denied any wrongdoing. Witnesses were interviewed. No witness observed any communication, either physical or verbal "*which could be of assistance in sustaining a prosecution*". However, another waitress said that she saw Fr Sergius attempt to put his hand on one of the girl's hips but the advance was sidestepped. Another waitress told Gardaí that he had touched her on the legs but she had not reported the behaviour.

42.5 In December 1995, the Gardaí brought the allegations to the attention of the Archdiocese. The Gardaí told Monsignor Stenson that a file was going to the DPP. Monsignor Stenson was anxious not to interfere with the legal process and did not interview the witnesses. He did speak to Fr Sergius who

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This is a pseudonym.

denied the allegations and claimed that he had witnesses to prove his innocence.

42.6 In April 1996, the DPP decided not to prosecute because the allegations were in the nature of sexual harassment rather than assault and, while the touching was inappropriate, it was not criminal in nature.

General complaints

42.7 In December 1996, a complaint was made to the Archdiocese about Fr Sergius's behaviour. It was alleged that, at a party in a parishioner's house, he had been drunk, used offensive language and made racist remarks to some foreign guests. He then began telephoning the parishioner's wife and pestering her. At a subsequent gathering, it was alleged that he was again drunk and that he became aggressive and insulting. It was alleged that he kissed a woman and pulled a young girl down on the couch to talk to him. The girl "*broke away from him in floods of tears*".

42.8 This complaint was relayed to the Archdiocese by the parish priest. The parish priest confirmed that there were other complaints about Fr Sergius's general behaviour. Bishop Ó Ceallaigh met the parish priest and then met Fr Sergius. The bishop had not been informed of previous incidents known to the Archdiocese – he was not aware of the violent nature of the relationship with the woman nor was he aware that the waitresses who were sexually harassed were minors. The bishop advised Fr Sergius to get help with his alcohol problem and offered to put him in touch with relevant professionals. Bishop Ó Ceallaigh had no further involvement with the case after this meeting. A further complaint was made in May 1997 which was similar to the December 1996 complaint.

Sabbatical leave

42.9 Fr Sergius applied for sabbatical leave in 1997 to go to a foreign diocese for two years. He was told that the Archdiocese would have to inform the foreign diocese about the complaints which had been made and the concerns which had been expressed. Archbishop Connell met Fr Sergius and told him that he would be welcome back in the Archdiocese after his two years abroad. Archbishop Connell wrote to the bishop of the foreign diocese

saying that Fr Sergius was “*a priest in good standing*” but added the following reservations:

- He could be aggressive in his use of language, especially if he has taken alcohol.
- He had had a three year involvement with a woman; this had been “*dealt with and is now regarded as a thing of the past*”.
- He had been accused of inappropriate behaviour towards a waitress in a restaurant. The “*public authority did not pursue the matter. Whatever may have happened would have been an isolated incident under the influence of alcohol*”.

The Archbishop expressed the view that Fr Sergius would act responsibly but undertook to take him back immediately if this was requested. The violent nature of his relationship with the woman and the more recent general complaints were not mentioned in the letter.

42.10 A standard contract was signed between the Archdiocese, the foreign diocese and Fr Sergius. The sabbatical leave was to run from September 1997 to September 1999. However, Fr Sergius returned home after just nine months. The Archdiocesan records do not show the reason for his early return. He was appointed to a parish in August 1998. It later became clear that the parish priest was not told of the problems which Fr Sergius had had in the past nor was his area bishop, Bishop Field.

Subsequent complaints

42.11 In February 1999, the principal and teachers of a school in Fr Sergius’s new parish complained to the parish priest about his conduct at a meeting of the confirmation class. The parents alleged that Fr Sergius arrived late, smelled strongly of alcohol and was truculent in his demeanour. A meeting was held involving the board of management, the principal and class teacher and the parish priest. The parish priest expressed surprise that Fr Sergius had been appointed as chaplain to the school. This seems to the Commission to be an extraordinary statement. As the Archbishop is the patron of the school, the appointment of chaplain is delegated to the parish priest, so the parish priest must himself have asked Fr Sergius to deal with the confirmation class.

42.12 The parish priest expressed reluctance to speak to Fr Sergius because “*he has a short fuse*”. The board of management then asked to see the head of the Education Secretariat in the Archdiocese and Bishop Field was informed. Bishop Field told the Commission that he had not been aware of the various other complaints about Fr Sergius. He thought he was dealing with a priest whose problems were entirely related to alcohol. Bishop Field tried to get Fr Sergius to address the alcohol problem but Fr Sergius has always asserted that he does not have a problem with alcohol. Bishop Field told the Commission that he had no power to oblige Fr Sergius to get help or treatment for his alcohol problem, about which he was clearly in denial.

42.13 In November 1999, another complaint was made about drunken and inappropriate behaviour on the part of Fr Sergius. In September 2001, a woman complained that she was sexually harassed by him. He was drunk at the time.

Physical abuse of altar boys

42.14 In April 2002, the parents of three altar boys complained that the boys had been physically and verbally abused by Fr Sergius. The parents demanded that he be removed from any situation at parish level. The delegate, Fr Gleeson, met the parents immediately. He concluded that the priest was no longer to be considered safe around children. He considered the matter to be serious enough to merit Fr Sergius’s removal from ministry and to have his alcohol and behavioural problems professionally assessed. He noted that the problems with Fr Sergius were “*of long standing*”.

42.15 Fr Sergius was asked to step aside from ministry. He was told that the decision would be reviewed pending treatment for his alcohol problems. Archbishop Connell sent a letter confirming the decision and asking him to seek “*appropriate professional assistance*” as the Archbishop would not be prepared to reinstate him without a positive medical report. The parents were informed.

42.16 Bishop Field recommended and organised treatment for Fr Sergius with the Granada Institute in May 2002. However, in June 2002, Fr Sergius informed Bishop Field that he would no longer be attending the institute and would instead be following legal advice on the matter. This was followed by

a solicitor's letter to the Archdiocese in July 2002 requesting copies of all documents relating to allegations and investigations of the Archdiocese.

42.17 Fr Sergius had written to Archbishop Connell in late May 2002 reaffirming his innocence and expressing his intention to retire from the diocese with adequate financial compensation. However, he was not prepared to resign his priestly ministry. In July, Fr Sergius accused Archbishop Connell of imposing a severe, extreme and unjust suspension from ministry. Archbishop Connell immediately responded explaining that, once he had a report from Granada, he would be in a position to discuss the future. The report from Granada in July 2002 concluded that Fr Sergius's behaviour must be taken seriously as there were indicators that he was getting into serious difficulty. Furthermore, because he was not willing to attend for additional sessions with Granada, it was concluded that the problems and complaints were likely to continue. Fr Sergius would need to gain much deeper insight into his behaviour before he could return to ministry. Fr Sergius believed the findings of the report were invalid and that fault for the entire process was with the Archdiocese.

42.18 In September 2002, Archbishop Connell again reiterated that there would be no return to ministry unless there was a positive report from Granada. This time, Fr Sergius did return to Granada. A residential course to deal with his alcohol problem was recommended by Granada but Fr Sergius refused to attend. He said he intended to retire from the diocese. He was officially released from his duties in October 2002 and became a beneficiary of the Clerical Fund Society (see Chapter 8). The Archdiocese provided him with a house.

42.19 Fr Sergius remains very disaffected with the Archdiocese even though it has been generous to him. He still wants to engage in ministry in Dublin. It appears that he sometimes helps out in another diocese. Bishop Field was aware of this and explained that, as Fr Sergius was retired from the Dublin Archdiocese, he was in fact free to help wherever he wished; he was not under any ministerial restriction. The Commission does not know if this other diocese has been informed of his situation.

The Commission's assessment

42.20 It may be the case that Fr Sergius's primary problem is one of excessive alcohol consumption. However, any priest who behaves in a sexually inappropriate way with minors, even if it happens only when he is drunk, should be treated in accordance with the guidelines on child sexual abuse. Fr Sergius should have been removed from ministry after the complaints from the young girls in the restaurant. He should not be allowed to minister until he deals with his alcohol problem. Retirement is not a substitute for removal from ministry.

42.21 His propensity to be sexually abusive was known to the Archdiocese so it should have been very concerned indeed about the complaints of the young girls. Bishop Ó Ceallaigh should have been informed of the full range of complaints against Fr Sergius when he was dealing with the December 1996 complaint.

42.22 His problems should have been made known to his parish priest and area bishop in 1998 and he should not have been allowed involvement with the confirmation class.

42.23 The Gardaí dealt appropriately with this case and there was no involvement by the health board.