

The Columbus Dispatch

Former Fisher Catholic nun accused of sexually abusing a student

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A nun who once taught at Fisher Catholic High School in Lancaster has been accused of sexually abusing a student 36 years ago, according to a police report.

Sister Lisa Zuccarelli, who belongs to the Dominican Sisters of Peace, was removed from her ministry, restricted from unsupervised contact with former students and minors, and was sent to a psychological center for clergy for assessment after the allegation came to light, the Columbus-based Dominican Sisters of Peace said in a news release. Details about when the abuse occurred weren't given.

Zuccarelli, 65, has not taught locally since 1985, when she left Fisher Catholic, according to the Dominican Sisters, which has a location near Ohio Dominican University that the order founded in 1911. During her time at Fisher Catholic, Zuccarelli lived in the St. Mary Convent in Lancaster.

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The Dominican Sisters of Peace learned about the accusations when a former student wrote a letter to the order in July. The order reported the allegations to Lancaster police and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Columbus that same month. An outside investigation in late October found the allegation credible, according to the release, which was issued Nov. 28 and didn't specify who conducted the investigation.

A Lancaster police report filed July 28 says the female student had left her home in 1982 due to abuse and Zuccarelli allowed her to stay in her room for the night. The student said Zuccarelli molested her that night, and told her to sneak out of

the convent the following morning, according to the report.

Lt. N.H. Snyder, with the Lancaster police detective bureau, said in an email that the victim spoke with the department's sexual assault detective and didn't want to pursue criminal charges.

He said the allegations reflected a misdemeanor, "borderline gross sexual imposition," and the crime was beyond the statute of limitations

Due both of these reasons, the case was closed, Snyder said.

"We consider this conduct reprehensible, and we are deeply sorry for the pain it has caused," Sister Patricia Twohill, prioress of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, said in a written statement. "We have approached the situation with as much transparency as possible, while being respectful of the privacy of the victim. We are doing all that we can to support the healing of all involved."

Twohill had talked to the victim about her letter, according to the police report. A search of local court records shows that no charges had been filed as of Tuesday.

Despite sexual abuse by Catholic priests being widely reported, there doesn't appear to be any statistics on the number of nuns or religious sisters accused of abusing minors, said Gary Schoener, a Minneapolis-based clinical psychologist. Yet experts know the abuse happens, he said.

"As with other things with the church, this is one of those areas that is sort of been undercover for years," said Schoener, who has worked with abuse victims for many years. "Just as it took a longer time for priest stuff to come out, nuns are even slower ... We've seen, certainly, many other cases but they're among the hardest to find."

It can take victims years sometimes to come forward, as it did with this incident, he said, because there is not a clear place to report abuse by nuns. And for children, sexual contact with a woman can be a "murky" area, Schoener said, as it is not as clearly defined as abuse by a male.

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), a nonprofit research center at Georgetown University that tracks reports of clergy sexual abuse of minors, doesn't have data on abuse specifically by nuns. A researcher said the center isn't aware of any other source for the information.

Zuccarelli had most recently been teaching at Salve Regina University in Rhode Island, where she'd been since 2003.

Zuccarelli was in Ohio from 1975 to 1985, during which time she taught at DeSales High School in Columbus (1975 to 1977), Catholic Central High School in Steubenville (1978 to 1980), and Fisher Catholic (1980 to 1985).

Anyone who has experienced sexual misconduct by a member of the Dominican Sisters is asked to contact law enforcement and Twohill at 614-416-1963.

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