

Jury told to acquit Doyle of indecent assault

Wexford People 30 Mar 2011

THE FIRST priest ever to be convicted of a child sex offence in Wexford was in court in Belfast last week, charged with indecently assaulting two schoolgirls in the North over 30 years ago.

James Doyle, found guilty in 1990 of the indecent assault of a young boy, was this time acquitted of indecently assaulting a young girl while serving in Northern Ireland during the 1970s.

The presiding judge ruled that the jury should acquit him after difficulties arose with the evidence of the alleged victim, and of another alleged victim who also made complaints about the former priest.

The trial took place at Belfast Crown Court, where Doyle charged with indecently assaulting two young girls while they were aged between seven and 10 years old on dates between March 31, 1976, and April 1, 1980.

Doyle (61) walked free from the court, however, after Judge Tom Burgess directed the jury to acquit him on 15 counts of indecent assault against one of the girls. The judge ruled that the alleged

victim's evidence had been 'innocently contaminated' by the other alleged victim.

Doyle, who now lives at Lower Gardiner Street in Dublin, faced 20 further charges of indecent assault against the second girl, but prosecution lawyer David Russell asked for those to be 'left on the books'.

In directing the jury, Judge Burgess said there was no suggestion that the women had colluded or 'deliberately fabricated' their accounts.

The trial came more than 20 years after what was a hugely controversial case at the time, when the former Clonard curate was convicted at Wexford District Court in November 1990 of indecently assaulting a boy at his home in Wexford town.

Doyle was the first cleric to appear in court on sex charges in the Diocese of Ferns and when the 'Wexford People' reported the case on its front page, there was a flood of public reaction, with many prominent local people supporting the nowdefrocked priest.

Doyle admitted the offence and



James Doyle in the 1990s, above, and this newspaper's reporting of his conviction in Wexford in November 1990.

was given a three-month suspended sentence on condition that he stay away from the parish

The earlier alleged offences at the centre of last week's court case in Belfast were said to have happened two years after Doyle

was ordained by the late Bishop Donal Herlihy as a priest in the Diocese of Ferns, despite previous reports of incidents of al-



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leged sexual abuse during his time as a student priest in St Peter's College. After his ordination, which was postponed for a year, he was posted to a parish in Belfast where he served from 1974 until 1979, when he returned to Wexford and was appointed as a curate in Clonard, where the offence occurred which led to his conviction in Wexford District Court 11 years later. The Ferns Inquiry revealed that the first sex abuse allegation against Doyle arose in 1972 and involved a boy in the boarding school in St Peter's College. His ordination was deferred a year but went ahead after a new president of St Peter's was appointed.

The Ferns Report described Doyle's ordination in the circumstances as 'wholly inappropriate' given that it provided him unsupervised access to children.