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Former priest says he warned of acts against children

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A former priest who worked with the Rev. John J. Geoghan in his first assignment said he warned church officials 30 years ago about Geoghan's behavior with children.

But Geoghan continued as a priest for the next 30 years, moving from parish to parish, allegedly molesting more than 50 children.

"I don't know that it could have been stopped," said Anthony J. Benzevich, who served with Geoghan at Blessed Sacrament in Saugus in the early 1960s.

Benzevich also served at St. Clare's in Braintree and other parishes before leaving the priesthood to get married. He said Geoghan's behavior was a factor in his decision to leave.

"I could see that something was amiss in Saugus, years ago," and told church officials, Benzevich said. "I didn't get anywhere."

Published reports yesterday based on unnamed sources said the Archdiocese of Boston has paid millions of dollars to people who claim Geoghan molested them.

The archdiocese acknowledged there have been settlements in the Geoghan cases, but refused to discuss details, issuing only a general statement about sadness at "episodes of clergy sexual misconduct." The statement did not admit responsibility for Geoghan's behavior, nor apologize directly to his alleged victims.

In addition to the civil cases, the Suffolk County district attorney's office is investigating allegations against Geoghan. They may be ready to present at least one case to a grand jury by fall.

While pleased the church is providing some compensation to the alleged victims, Benzevich said Geoghan has never been properly punished.

"If Geoghan gets off scot-free, . . . others will do the same thing," Benzevich said. "He should never be allowed to take part in any church activities."

Benzevich, who now lives in Dorchester, said he became suspicious when Geoghan repeatedly brought children to the rectory and met with them for long periods of time behind closed doors.

"They would come out in various states of undress. He would put his jacket over them and said he was trying to show them how to be little priests," Benzevich said.

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Benzevich said he was branded as a troublemaker for reporting Geoghan. Benzevich said church officials hinted that he might be sent to do missionary work in Peru if he persisted.

Benzevich recently picketed outside Masses held to help heal victims of clergy sexual abuse.

Although he has been a mail handler for the postal service for years, Benzevich said people who come to him for help with their disillusionment with the church still call him "father."

"They want to see justice, as I do. They want to see something happen to alleviate the bitterness because of Geoghan doing what he did," Benzevich said.

He said he still venerates the church.

Archdiocesan spokesman John Walsh, while declining to comment on Benzevich or Geoghan, said the church aims for justice and healing for

victims of sexual abuse by clergy. He said steps have been taken to address the problem.

"In the last five, six years, we've talked a great deal about this terrible issue," Walsh said.

"There are pending legal claims and a criminal investigation (regarding Geoghan), so we just don't think it's appropriate to discuss the details of the case," Walsh said. "But as things develop, we'll try to respond with as much information as we can."

Walsh emphasized the church respects the rights of victims to seek redress through the courts.

"When someone comes to us for pastoral support or counseling, we make sure they understand they have rights in the area of civil litigation or criminal complaints," Walsh said. "Their access to these services will continue, even if the individual chooses to pursue civil litigation or criminal charges, and we'll cooperate fully with civil authorities in any investigations."

In the early 1960s, Geoghan was regarded as a priest with energy and charisma. He was especially popular with children. He started baseball and basketball teams and befriended altar boys who were honored to serve Mass for him.

John Sacco of Saugus was one of those boys. Sacco, 37, said Geoghan was like a surrogate father to him and his five siblings. But Geoghan betrayed their trust and took advantage of their devotion and friendship, Sacco said.

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In February 1997 the Sacco family became the third to file a lawsuit against Geoghan. The suit alleged that 11 family members were sexually and psychologically abused by Geoghan between 1962, when he was assigned to the Blessed Sacrament Parish in Saugus, and the early 1980s. Since the Saccos and others went public, dozens of people have come forward with similar shocking charges.

Sacco, 37, also declined to comment on any settlement of his family's lawsuit.

"I'd like to make a statement but I am not allowed to talk about the man, the facts or the church," he said in a telephone interview yesterday. "I am still waiting to be healed. That will only come when the church does the right thing."

The "right thing," Sacco said, is for church leaders to admit they made a mistake by not protecting young parishioners from Geoghan and providing treatment to victims.

A series of Masses were held last fall in an attempt to heal some of the spiritual scars left by priests who committed sexual abuse. But many victims felt the church still was not taking enough responsibility for the actions of its priests.

Geoghan served as pastor at St. Paul's from 1968 to 1974, but has not been publically accused of molesting Hingham children.

He also served at St. Andrew's in Boston's Forest Hill neighborhood, St. Brendan's in Dorchester and St. Julia's in Weston, as well as Blessed Sacrament in Saugus.

Geoghan, 63, is living in a Boston home for retired priests. He has declined to comment on the allegations against him.

Mitchell Garabedian, a Boston lawyer handling a dozen lawsuits still pending against Geoghan and the Archdiocese, said two more alleged victims came forward yesterday.

Garabedian would not say whether other clients of his have agreed to settlements.

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