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Abusive cleric gets life

Published in the Home News Tribune 6/17/04

By MARY ANN BOURBEAU
STAFF WRITER

A priest who served in the Diocese of Metuchen in the mid-1980s has been sentenced to life in prison for sexually abusing a Massachusetts boy.

On May 20, a jury in Middlesex County Superior Court in Cambridge, Mass., convicted the Rev. Romano Ferraro in connection with the sexual assault of a child in Billerica, Mass. Ferraro, 70, was found guilty of rape of a child, and indecent assault and battery on a child under the age of 14.

The Most Rev. Paul G. Bootkoski, bishop of the Diocese of Metuchen, wrote a letter to parishioners that was published in Sunday's church bulletins. In it, he said there was nothing in Ferraro's personnel file at the time he was in the Metuchen diocese to suggest he sexually abused children.

"Tragically, after Father Ferraro left here it was learned that he had sexually abused two minors in the same family during the time he worked in the Diocese," Bootkoski wrote. "At the time the allegations were received, the Diocese gave assistance to the victims and helped the family to begin the process of recovery."

Joanne Ward, spokesperson for the Diocese of Metuchen, said the allegations were received in the fall of 1991, and that the victims were from the diocese, but she was unsure what parish they belonged to.

Julia McClure, first deputy assistant Middlesex County (N.J.) prosecutor, said no criminal charges were ever brought against Ferraro in the county.

Ferraro was ordained in May 1960 in the Diocese of Brooklyn, N.Y.. He



Special to the Home News Tribune

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served at St. James R.C. Church in Woodbridge from June 1984 to November 1984. He then went to Our Lady of Mount Virgin R.C. Church in Middlesex until June 1985, when he was transferred to St. John Vianney R.C. Church in Colonia.

Ferraro garnered worldwide attention there in December 1986, when he told St. John Vianney grammar school children during a Mass for the Feast of St. Nicholas that there is no such thing as Santa Claus. He said Santa was a fairy tale, that gifts are given by relatives, and that their parents had been lying to them. The pupils emerged from the Mass with tears in their eyes, and parents were furious over the incident. Ferraro was asked to leave the diocese in January 1987, Bootkoski said.

He is the second priest who served at St. John Vianney R.C. Church to face allegations of sexual abuse. In 2002, the Rev. John R. Butler was accused of misconduct with a minor 40 years prior to that in Long Island, N.Y.

A 50-year-old Brooklyn man brought the allegations to the Metuchen diocese and the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office in New York. He alleged the molestation occurred when he was a choir boy and altar boy at St. Joseph's R.C. Church in Kings Park, N.Y.

Monsignor Michael Cashman of St. James R.C. Church in Woodbridge also was accused of sexually abusing two children at St. Ambrose's R.C. Church in Old Bridge 25 years ago, though no criminal charges were brought against him either.

In Ferraro's case, authorities said he raped and sexually assaulted the son of a family friend between 1970 and 1980, beginning when the boy was 4 years old. The abuses occurred when Ferraro visited the family, according to Emily LaGrassa, press secretary for the Middlesex County District Attorney's Office in Massachusetts.

LaGrassa said there have been other allegations of abuse against Ferraro, but she said she didn't know whether there were other criminal cases. Ferraro was a priest in New York at the time of the incidents and was not assigned to a parish in Massachusetts.

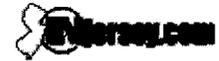
"He took the stand in his own defense," she said. "He admitted to being a pedophile and abusing other children, but he did not admit to abusing this particular child."

While on the stand, the Roman Catholic priest was asked why he performed these acts on his victims. His answer, according to LaGrassa, was, "I did it to please the children."

The Boston Globe reported that Ferraro forced the victim to sleep naked, performed oral sex on the child and forced the victim to stroke his genitals while Ferraro stroked the child's genitals.

In January, a St. Louis man sued Ferraro and the Archdiocese of St. Louis, claiming the priest raped him in the 1980s. According to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the man said the abuses took place 20 years ago when he served as an altar boy. The newspaper said Ferraro lived in St. Louis in the early 1980s but was not assigned to any parish duties there.

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The St. Louis Post-Dispatch also reported that Ferraro was among 13 priests named as defendants in a \$300 million suit filed in 2002 against the Diocese of Brooklyn in New York. A spokesperson from that diocese was not available for comment yesterday.

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