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Lawsuit Alleges Abuse at Rockford Parish over 30 Years Ago

By Penny Wiegert, Editor
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ROCKFORD—Kathleen Gibbons, 46, of Rockford, has filed a lawsuit alleging she was abused by two priests and a man identified as a religious brother while she was a student at Holy Family School more than 30 years ago. She is seeking monetary compensation from the Diocese of Rockford in excess of \$5 million.

In her lawsuit filed Friday, Jan. 31, Gibbons alleges that Father Al Harte, former pastor at Holy Family Parish, Rockford, and now deceased; and two others identified in the complaint only as "Father Bob, last name unknown," and "Brother Allen, last name unknown;" sexually abused her while she attended school at Holy Family between 1978 and 1980.

Father Harte was associate pastor at the parish from Aug. 3, 1976 to Sept. 26, 1977 and pastor from Sept. 26, 1977 to July 14, 1989. He was elevated to a monsignor on Jan. 3, 1996. He died on Aug. 24, 2002.

"The case is being investigated fully, but we have no information at this time to suggest that these allegations are credible, said Ellen Lynch, General Counsel for the Diocese of Rockford.

"The Rockford Diocese makes every effort to assure the safety and protection of its young people and takes accusations of abuse by any person very seriously. Even though the claims of abuse in this case occurred 35 years ago and one of the accused parties is deceased, this case is being fully investigated and we are confident justice will be served," said Bishop David J. Malloy.

Father Edward Seisser, current pastor of Holy Family Parish, read a letter at all Masses the weekend of Feb. 1 and 2 informing parishioners of the accusations. His letter stated "This news may be particularly disturbing for some of our longtime members here as the lawsuit names a priest who is remembered as giving exemplary years of service and great care to this parish."

Father Seisser also emphasized the strict policies maintained by the diocese in regard to preventing and reporting abuse.

"Our primary concern is the safety and well-being of all members of our parish and school family especially our young people. It is regrettable that this lawsuit may put a negative spotlight on our parish and school, but together we can stand confident that we are educating, worshipping and growing in a healthy and moral environment and we will never waiver in our efforts to maintain it as such. It is also an opportunity for us to continue our vigilance for safe environments and for families to continue conversations about appropriate behaviors at home and in society.

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“Please continue to pray for all those everywhere who may have been affected by any abuse or wrong-doing in the past and that they receive both justice and healing,” the letter said.



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