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Twin Cities archdiocese reopens case of priest accused of sex abuse

by Brian Roewe

The St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese has reopened the case of a retired priest accused of sexual abuse in the 1970s it has already twice cleared of sexual misconduct.

The archdiocese announced Friday morning that it had begun reinvestigating an allegation against Fr. William Stolzman, 76, it first received in 2008. The decision came Jan. 14, the same day attorney Jeff Anderson made public Stolzman's file, along with those of five other priests. Stolzman has been placed on a leave of absence and is restricted from exercising priestly ministry during the investigation.

Director of Ministerial Standards and Safe Environment Tim O'Malley told *NCR* that to his knowledge, Stolzman has not had additional allegations brought against him. He added that at this point, no new evidence has surfaced, and the review is part of a process in his office of re-examining old cases that involved children or anything related to misconduct.

"And in my determination, I think this warrants a reinvestigation because with the passage of time, I think we have maybe an opportunity to gather a more complete information than they had back in 2008," he said.

Attorney Mike Finnegan said Anderson's firm recommended the Stolzman case be reopened because of several "red flags" beyond the 2008 accusation: possible child pornography in 1997, the investigation by former vicar general Fr. Kevin McDonough, and the fact that the priest was still occasionally celebrating Mass in the area.

Stolzman, who retired in June 2008, was among several priests filling in at the Church of St. Michael in Farmington, Minn., while its pastor has been on sabbatical. Bulletins show him scheduled to preside at Masses on four days since Dec. 14. He was also scheduled for the Jan. 17-18 weekend, but O'Malley said Stolzman did not celebrate Masses those days, adding that the archdiocese contacted parishes where he may have recently celebrated Mass about his current status.

O'Malley said he met with Stolzman on Jan. 16 and informed him that his office would again be reviewing his case. O'Malley said the priest was disappointed and again reiterated that he did not commit the alleged offense.

"And I said, 'Well, we're going to look at it, in fairness to you, in fairness to the person who made the accusation, and in fairness really in a broader way not just to this archdiocese, but all the faithful, that when we're looking at these files, we made the assurance that we would look at this stuff anew and look at it fresh,' " O'Malley said.

According to the unsealed documents, the archdiocese was notified in March 2008 through a South Dakota prison chaplain that an inmate alleged Stolzman had fondled him as a child in the early to mid-1970s. At the time, Stolzman was a priest in the Society of Jesus, and from 1973 to 1988 worked on Native American missions in South Dakota. He was incardinated into the Twin Cities archdiocese in 1994.

The chaplain told McDonough there was no reason to question the report's reliability, and that the inmate was willing to meet with church officials. In a six-page handwritten statement dated April 1, 2008, the inmate said he had "been blocking out what happened for over 30 years," and then recounted several instances of alleged molestation.

In an April 4, 2008, memo to senior officials -- including previous Archbishop Harry Flynn and current Archbishop John Nienstedt -- McDonough shared the available documentation of the complaint and reported that Stolzman denied abusing the inmate or other children. The priest said he remembered his accuser's extended family but not him.

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McDonough said the denial had "a good deal of credibility" because Stolzman, who estimated he made at least 10 trips with youth groups in four years at the Rosebud Indian Reservation, would have had "constant opportunity to abuse," and the archdiocese should have received additional complaints. He recommended civil authorities investigate the complaint "as soon and as aggressively as possible," that Stolzman be left at the Church of St. Mark in Shakopee, Minn., until more corroborating evidence was gathered, and that the parish's trustees, school principal and heads of religious education and the parish council be informed.

According to the documents, the FBI opted not to investigate the claim because it "was beyond any criminal statute of limitations." South Dakota Child Protective Services also did not investigate.

In June 2009, McDonough recommended Nienstedt close the preliminary investigation because of insufficient evidence, partly because the accuser had not further contacted the archdiocese nor responded to "various direct and indirect appeals from us that he do so."

He also suggested it be sent to the Clergy Review Board, who in March 2010 recommended a last effort be made to contact the alleged victim through independent investigator Richard Setter to provide further information. On April 21, 2010, Nienstedt stated in a memo, "I am satisfied that this case should now be considered closed."

The clearing of his name was the second time for Stolzman by the archdiocese, which in 1997 reviewed a charge of child pornography. In a March 31, 1997, letter to McDonough, Stolzman firmly stated he had never possessed or viewed such material in his life. He explained he had a subscription to *Men's Workout* magazine that occasionally featured young adult men posing nude -- what he called "blue material."

"For me these pictures provide a means for experiencing my sexuality and sensuality without acting out. In some people's minds the sight of a nude is a preamble to sexual activity, but for me it is a means of satisfying and sublimating my sexual desires," he said, later admitting he had on five occasions viewed pornographic videos but "always experienced great repugnance toward their pornographic displays."

In May 1997, Stolzman checked into the Anodos Center at St. John Vianney Hospital in Philadelphia for a four-day psychodiagnostic assessment. McDonough said in a May 16, 1997, memo to Flynn that "the clinical staff do not believe that the purchase or use of child pornography is consistent with who Father Stolzman seems to be." Flynn wrote to Stolzman that day informing the priest the matter was closed, and "you may consider yourself 'cleared.' "

The attorney Finnegan told *NCR* he is confident O'Malley -- hired by the archdiocese in August and a former head of the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension -- will better examine the case than the archdiocese

had done under McDonough, and that his team would be able to contact the former inmate, who was released in June 2008.

"Sometimes after a lot of years, people are at a different place in their life," O'Malley said, "and they're either more cooperative or ... sometimes there's evidence that comes forward much later, so we're taking a look at that."

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