

Former Newburgh bishop, priest accused of sex abuse

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CITY OF NEWBURGH — A former parishioner of St. Patrick's Church on Grand Street alleges in a new lawsuit that both a bishop and another priest at the church sexually abused him when he was a boy.

The accused clergymen are Bishop Austin Vaughn, who was named pastor of the Newburgh church in 1979, and the Rev. Donald Whelan, who was made administrator at around the same time, according to the St. Patrick's website. Both men are now deceased; Vaughn died in 2000 and Whelan in 1987.

The lawsuit filed in state Supreme Court in Manhattan on Nov. 26 by Jack Shapiro says the acts occurred on church property between 1979 and 1984, but gives no other details. Shapiro's Manhattan attorney, Peter Saghir, declined on Thursday to discuss the allegations, and said only that his client lives in New York.

The case, which names St. Patrick's and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York as defendants, is part of a flood of lawsuits filed in New York since Aug. 14 under the Child Victims Act, a state law that gave people who were sexually abused as children a one-year window to bring civil claims that otherwise would be barred by the statute of limitations.

Vaughn was known in his day as a fervent abortion opponent who went to jail more than once for his activism, including the 10 days he served in Albany in 1990 for trying to block the entrance to an abortion clinic a year earlier, according to his 2000 obituary in the New York Times. A 1993 Times Herald-Record article said Vaughn was the first American bishop to be arrested for protesting at an abortion clinic.

Vaughn generated further publicity during his Albany jail stay by reportedly telling an interviewer that then-Gov. Mario Cuomo risked “going to hell” for supporting abortion rights and the use of Medicaid to pay for abortions.

Joseph Zwilling, an archdiocese spokesman, said Thursday that he couldn’t comment on specific abuse claims, but that the archdiocese “takes all allegations of abuse seriously” and continues to work with abuse survivors.

He said the archdiocese encourages victims to consider applying to a compensation fund established in 2016 by the archdiocese and administered by mediator Kenneth Feinberg as an alternative to litigation. The fund is known as the Independent Reconciliation and Compensation Program, or IRCP.

Earlier this year, Whelan’s name was included on a list of 120 former priests, all but one of them deceased, who were accused of sexual abuse after they had died or left the priesthood, and whose alleged victims were deemed eligible for compensation through the IRCP. The list gives no information about the claims.

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